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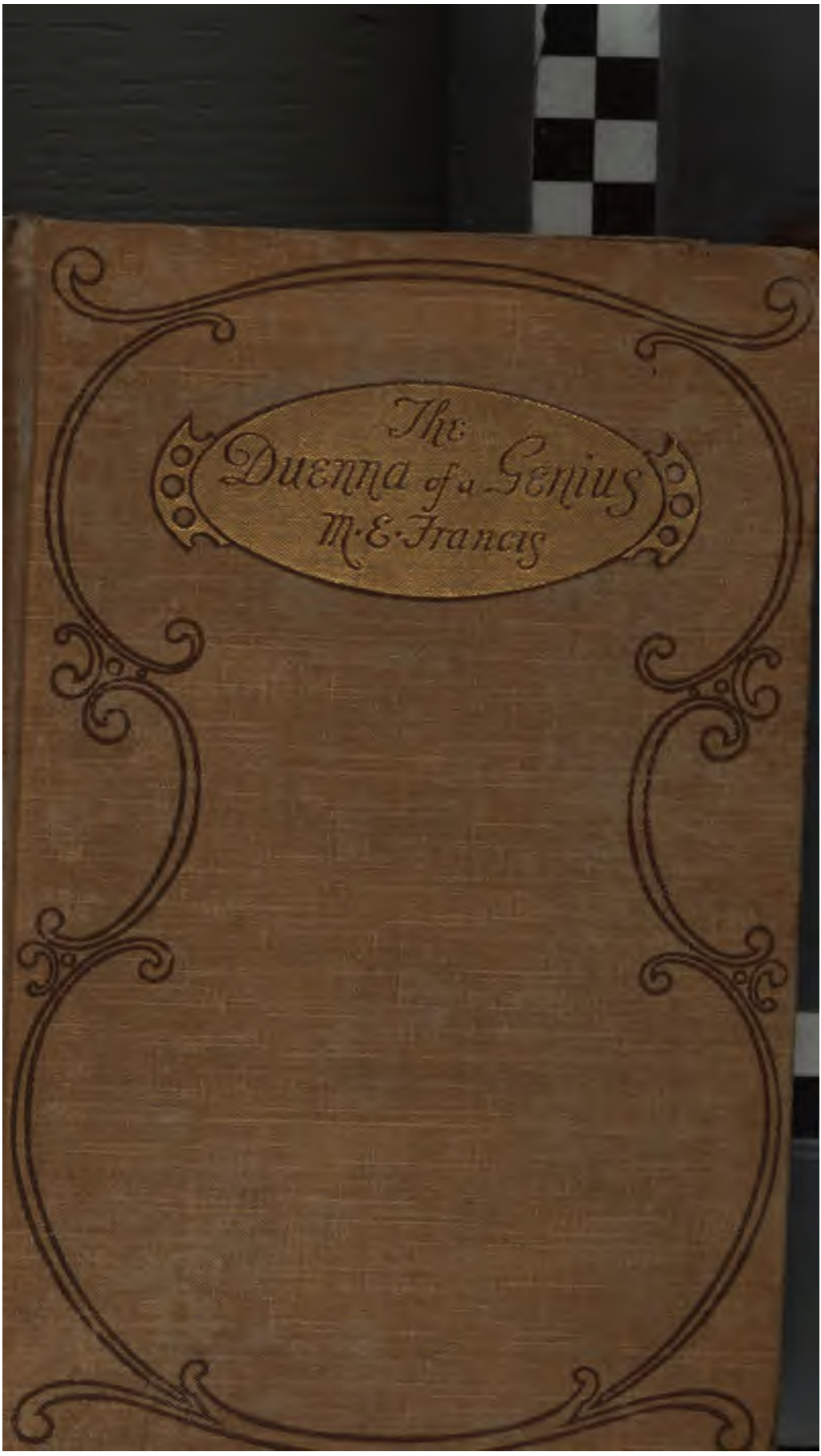
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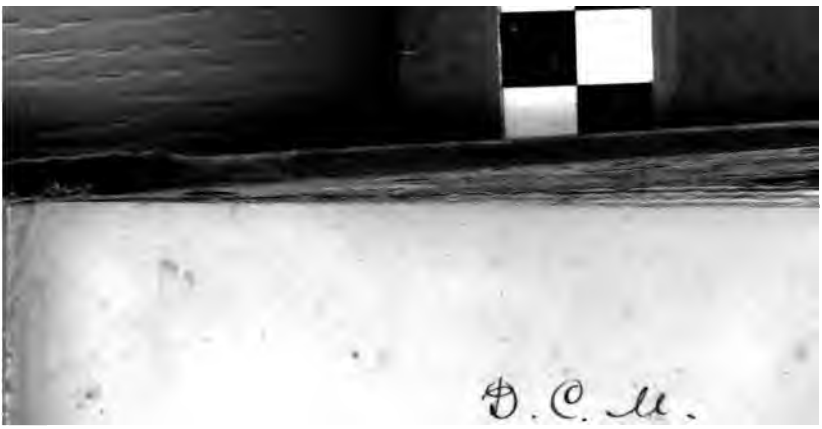
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The Duenna of a Genius
M. E. Francis



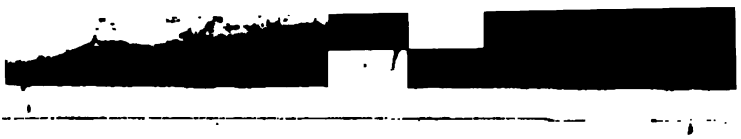


With love from

A + B. M.

- March

1899.





D. C. M.

with love from

A. B. M.

March

1899.



THE DUENNA OF A GENIUS

By M. E. FRANCIS, *Author of 'In a North Country Village,' &c.*



LONDON AND NEW YORK
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Dedication

TO

MONSIEUR JAN IGNACE PADEREWSKI

The love-tales of former days were chanted to the accompaniment of music, and I, belated Minnesinger of these modern times, would fain the sound of music were heard the while my story is told. For I might say that music itself is my theme; and that my characters are moulded by it, and my incidents developed from it as so many variations.

But now, the work being done, I ask myself if it be complete. I may call it in my own mind a romance of music; I may mark its different movements as though it were indeed a musical score; but will the words convey my meaning—will others hear my dream-music as I hear it? Or will the notes I strike sound but as the tinkle of an accompaniment while the theme itself is lost?

And so I have bethought me of calling upon you, who, more than any living man, perhaps, have made music a reality to our generation; who have discovered to us beauties indescribable, subtleties unending: that the mere sound of your name, evoking as it must a thousand exquisite memories, may give expression to this my fancy, and make my music live.

M. B.





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The Duenna of a Genius

I

INTRODUZIONE

"HAVE you put in the gun-case?"

"Yes, Sir John."

"And the golf-clubs?"

"They are here in the corner, Sir John."

"All right — go and take the tickets."

Sturgess disappeared, and Sir John Croft began to pace the platform slowly; looking round him albeit a trifle impatiently, for he found himself quite ten minutes too soon for his train. This was a circumstance which had seldom before occurred, and he felt naturally annoyed. He could not think what had possessed that stupid fellow Sturgess, who, as a rule, timed his arrivals and departures so exactly. Sir John liked to have precisely three minutes to spare when arriving at a station — one minute wherein to betake himself to the

platform, another for the bookstall, a third in which to settle himself comfortably in a corner of the railway carriage. As for Sturgess — no valet was worth his salt who could not manage in three minutes to see to luggage, take tickets, and scramble into his place.

Sir John Croft felt these crumples in his bed of rose-leaves the more in that he was what the world called an exceptionally fortunate man. He had been in possession of his baronetcy and property for about two years; there were mines on this property, tin, or coal, or iron, his friends were not quite sure which. But, to make amends for their ignorance on this point, they always displayed an intimate knowledge of the amount of his income; and even taking it for granted that they were kind enough to multiply it by three, or perchance by four, the fact was sufficiently patent to everyone: John Croft was colossally rich. Then he was young — not yet thirty-two — handsome, healthy, and, moreover, honestly interested in life and in his fellow-creatures. He had chosen the career of a diplomatist before his uncle's unexpected death had rendered it unnecessary for him to have any career at all, and, being a clever

young man, with influential connections, had had many interesting experiences in foreign lands.

As he paced up and down the crowded Waterloo platform, his quick eye flitted from face to face with eager observation; now and then a smile of amusement made his moustache twitch as he caught sentences at random among the throng, and all at once he wheeled round to look again at two figures who had just brushed past him. They were very small figures — two tiny dark-eyed women, who were talking rapidly in French. A second glance revealed that both were young and pretty, the beauty of one being particularly striking. The other, laden with shawls and packages, was now laboriously assisting her companion to climb into a third-class carriage.

"Tiens — do not be so impatient! I will get your paper directly."

Croft walked on, wheeling as he reached the further end of the platform, and slowly retracing his steps. The face of the prettier French girl was pressed against the window-pane as he passed her carriage. What a charming face! What long, strange, beautiful eyes! what



delicate features! But how cross the small lady was! Those finely pencilled brows were fiercely knit, the lips were pouting, and, through the open door, he could see the point of an impatient foot tapping on the carriage floor.

"Ah, ça," she called out, "are you never coming back? Make haste! the train is just going to start."

"J'arrive, chérie; see, I have brought you an evening paper."

"I told you to bring me *Punch*," cried the imperious voice from within the carriage.

John Croft paused a few paces away, feigning not to observe the pair, but in reality amused and interested. Little woman No. 1 was looking out with a flushed and angry face; little woman No. 2 stood smiling by the door, holding out the paper for the other's acceptance.

"No, Valérie," said No. 2 firmly, "I will not buy you *Punch;* I told you I would not. It costs three times as much as this paper, which is quite as amusing. We have not money to throw away, remember."

"I do not like," returned Valérie, "your nasty little paper. When it is not sneering, it is boasting."

"Oh! oh!" cried the other, with a mock groan.

John Croft, in the background, raised his eyebrows, and was disposed to dispute this somewhat sweeping denunciation of his favourite evening journal.

"Besides," pursued Valérie, pouting more than ever, "I want pictures!"

"I will change this, if you like, for *Sc-r-raps*," said No. 2, with such a funny emphasis on the word that Valérie laughed.

"No, I prefer *Ally Slopair*."

"Now do not be a child," said No. 2; "the train is really going to start — let me get in."

This reminded Croft that it behoved him, too, to seek his place; he walked rapidly towards the carriage he had already chosen, but, as he was about to enter it, he saw something white whizz from the compartment which had so long engaged his attention. When the train started, a moment or two later, he looked out with some curiosity: just beside the spot where the girl he called No. 2 had been standing lay the despised newspaper.

Leaning back in his comfortable corner, and lighting his first cigarette, the young man suf-



fered his thoughts to linger on these interesting, strange little Frenchwomen; French, at least, they would seem to be, judged by their tongue and a certain jauntiness of air and garb; yet something about them — the complexion, the shape of the face — above all, the setting of the eyes — seemed to belong rather to the Slavonic type. What of their station in life? They were travelling third class, poor things! and No. 2 seemed to do the combined work of maid, footman, and chaperon. He smiled as he remembered the recent discussion: no, they were certainly not well off; but nevertheless there was an air of refinement, even of distinction, about them, which would, under any circumstances, have betrayed that they were ladies. What were they doing? Whither were they going? They were very young to be roaming the world alone; No. 1, indeed, looked almost a child.

While he thus idly wondered and pondered the hours wore away: it was not really a very long journey, though Croft considered it a particularly tedious one, accomplishing it, nevertheless, two or three times a year. His aunt, Lady Mary Bracken, whom he was about to

visit, was an original and charming woman; and her house was, for his consolation, one of the pleasantest imaginable.

The abominable little junction at which it was necessary to change had been reached, and Croft, Sturgess, and their various paraphernalia transferred to another train, when, to Sir John's interest and amusement, he observed that his foreign fellow-travellers were also migrating from one platform to the other. When the train stopped at a small wayside station, the last before the one at which Croft meant to alight, he was surprised, on looking out, to behold them again, running along the platform, much encumbered with their various belongings, and apparently in a violent hurry. Seeing them wrestling with the stiff handle of the door of the neighbouring first-class compartment, Croft opened his own, towards which they immediately rushed.

"Get in, Valérie; get in — quick!" cried the girl who appeared to be the leader; "I have but an instant to take the tickets."

She flew away, breathless, and presently returned, holding two first-class tickets between her shining white teeth; her purse being in

one hand, while the other struggled vehemently with the carriage door, which an officious porter had an instant before been kind enough to close.

Sir John hastened to open it, and to help her to climb in, which she did just as the train was moving. She crossed to the further end of the carriage opposite her sister, and threw herself back in a seat, panting and laughing.

"If you had been left behind, Margot," said Valérie, "I would not have gone to that place at all."

"Si, si," said Margot, putting the tickets in her purse, which she closed with a snap; "you would have gone, Valérie, for our hostess would not otherwise have known what had become of us. I should have followed in a cab in time to dress you for dinner."

Valérie sat upright, frowning for a moment; then, leaning forward, she began to talk rapidly in another language — a language which fell familiarly on Croft's ears. It was Hungarian. Many a time had he heard it of old. When he had been attached to the British Legation at Vienna he had even made a special study of it. So he was right in his surmise — these girls

were not of Frankish origin. Now that he studied them afresh he could see that the eyes of the one called Margot — a pretty name, Margot — were of a deep blue, the blue he had often seen in Austria, differing from the blue eyes of his own countrywomen as a sapphire differs from a forget-me-not. It was their thick, long, black lashes which caused them to look so dark. In his pleased interest at the discovery of the girls' nationality he forgot that he was practically eavesdropping, for the strangers evidently considered themselves quite safe in discussing before him matters of an intimate and personal nature.

"Margot," said Valérie, "do you hear? I will not be dressed by a strange maid — if one comes, I shall lock my door."

"Well, I hope one will not come, for it would be rude to refuse an offer that is kindly meant."

"It will not be kindly meant. She will want to see what things we have got and how we are dressed — ah, and she will see the darns in my only silk petticoat! It is all patched, patched, patched — how can I allow a stranger to stare at it?"

It was at this juncture that Croft began to be

conscious that the conversation was not meant for his ears, and to wonder nervously whether he ought not to confess his acquaintance with the tongue used with such blissful security. But he hesitated, dreading to bring the girls to confusion.

"I hate the curiosity of these English," pursued Valérie; "they look at us as if we belonged to quite another species — they stare as if we were little wild animals; they ask us questions — questions which we should not think of asking any but our most intimate friends! They make remarks — bah! I hate them!"

"Do not be so foolish, Valérie," returned Margot, reddening, and throwing back her head with a little proud air which amused Croft, who was furtively watching from behind his newspaper. "You speak as if we were inferior to these people."

"So they think," interrupted Valérie. "Are we not artists? Are we not paid for coming here? Oh, I know what you would say, Ma'am'selle la Marquise; but, my dear, it is not birth which is respected in this country — it is money. And, à propos of money, there is another reason why I dislike this undertaking,

Margot. It will cost us four times — ten times — what we shall gain by it. The coachman who drives us from the station; the nasty, big footmen with their floured heads; the housemaids; the maid whom I shall *not* allow to dress me — they will all, all expect money; and whatever we give, they will think it too little — ach, I wish we had not come!"

There was a long pause, Sir John presently stealing a glance at Margot, who sat very straight, looking a little pale, he thought, and extremely serious.

"I have thought over it," she said, "and I consider it wise to come — yes, in spite of all the expense. It is necessary for you, you see. You can never succeed unless you are known — this seemed to me a chance. Now" — in an altered tone — "we shall be getting out directly; it would be well for you, I think, to change your gloves."

Opening her bag, she took out two pairs of new gloves, beginning with great care and precision to remove those she wore, while her sister did the same. Croft remarked with a kind of compassionate amusement that those they took off were much worn and had been

frequently mended. While Valérie was coaxing the buttons of one of the new pair to meet around her plump little wrist, she suddenly uttered an exclamation: —

"Margot, Margot! my shoes — you never sewed the pink bows on my shoes!"

Margot paused, evidently stricken and contrite. "It is true; I have forgotten!"

"Everything goes wrong," said Valérie, tragically. "Every single thing! Not even my little pink bows, that I had counted on! Ah, Margot!"

"Beloved," said Margot, almost with tears in her voice, "I am so sorry that I should have forgotten; but truly I will sew them on in time — they dine so late it will be easy."

Valérie pouted still, as Croft observed, with gathering impatience. She was, if anything, the younger of the two; and how imperious she was to her sister, how irrational, how spoilt! But just at that moment Margot leaned forward and patted her hand; whereupon the little lady banished the pout from her face, and replaced it by a smile — such a smile! — gracious, tender, disclosing the most fascinating and unexpected dimples; the eyes, moreover, lighting up and

laughing too, so sweetly, that Croft succumbed. She was spoilt, yes, but delicious!

His reflections were cut short by the train slackening speed, and presently all alighted together. There was the omnibus from Brackenhurst — why, his fellow-travellers were actually making their way towards it under the guidance of a porter. He could hear Margot stating in her pretty, foreign English that they were going to Lady Mary Bracken's. There was Sturgess, full of importance as usual, taking possession of the entire equipage, and installing his master's belongings in the most desirable corners; apparently oblivious of the fact that the two ladies were waiting for him to withdraw his portly person from the doorway. An emphatic dig from Sir John's stick, accompanied by a curt admonition, soon removed the obstacle, and then Croft, raising his hat, remarked that he believed they were bound for the same place, and inquired if he could make himself of use.

"Thank you," said Margot, "I think all our effects are already rassembled."

The quaint, rather deliberate English fell from her lips, Croft thought, more prettily than either of the languages which the sisters spoke so

volubly; he observed, as she looked up at him, that her eyes, though less large and brilliant than her sister's, had a greater charm of expression — un regard voilé, as she herself might have termed it.

He bowed and held back the door smilingly, while they entered; Margot acknowledging the attention with a funny little, stately bow, while Valérie brushed past, holding her head very high, and wearing an air of haughty displeasure. Croft followed, rather at a loss to account for the little creature's airs and graces, and cudgelling his brains to discover in what he had managed to offend her.

He was not long left in doubt. Having taken up her position in the furthermost corner of the vehicle, she again addressed her sister in Hungarian, her eyes flashing fire, her lips quivering with excitement: —

"I could die with shame, Margot! He also comes with us. What possessed you to get into his carriage when the whole train was open to us?"

"But why not?" returned Margot, opening her eyes very wide. "There is nothing amiss with the young man — why should we shun him?"

Croft with difficulty restrained a grateful glance in her direction. Why, indeed, had this unreasonable being taken a dislike to him? He on his part was disposed to be particularly amiable.

"Do you ask?" cried Valérie, her small hands clenching themselves on her lap. "Did he not see us getting into a third-class carriage in London? I saw him watching us when you were so long absent buying your stupid paper — ah! all our little plan is now of no use! We might just as well have travelled third class all the way — he will tell everyone he saw us changing just at the last station; he was looking out when you were getting the tickets — I saw him. Is it not like you, Margot? He is the only one in all that train-full of people who is coming here, and you must choose his carriage!"

"My dear, the door happened to be partly open," returned Margot in a deprecating tone. "Do not make yourself unhappy. I daresay, though you fancy it, he did not really observe us."

"Do not speak to me," cried Valérie. "He also saw us changing our gloves; he watched



us — I saw him. He was smiling to himself behind his newspaper."

"That is certainly unfortunate," returned Margot, in tones of such deep depression that Croft felt a monster of duplicity and guilt. If they guessed that he had understood all their confidences to each other! that he even knew about the only silk petticoat!

With an impatient shrug of her shoulders Valérie threw herself back in her corner; and Croft, to break the awkward silence which ensued, endeavoured presently to engage the elder sister in conversation. She answered him politely, but somewhat absently, and there was a latent trouble in her face which caused him to feel more and more ill at ease. If he could only assure them that he would not for worlds betray their little secrets! But to do so was, of course, impossible.

From Margot's somewhat exigious answers to his insinuating questions he learnt, however. that they had not been long in England, that they lived in London, that they knew Lady Mary Bracken slightly, and that they intended to remain about a week at Brackenhurst.

"My aunt is giving one of her large charitable

entertainments, is she not?" he asked by-and-by. "As a rule, one rather dreads them. Do you happen to know what institution is to be benefited this time? Is it the Model Hospital or the Night School?"

"I really do not know," returned Margot, shrugging her shoulders, with a smile; a very sweet smile, though perhaps less fascinating than her sister's. Her face did not seem, like Valérie's, to sparkle all over, and only one dimple was revealed; John Croft observed, moreover, that the eyes remained thoughtful and even sad. Did they never laugh? he wondered. Now, what could these little people be? Artists they called themselves. There were many varieties of the species. Were they actresses? He dismissed the suggestion as soon as it occurred to him, and yet he knew that among the items of Lady Mary's charitable bill of fare was included a play. But there was also to be a concert — perhaps they were musicians.

"I believe there is to be a concert on Wednesday," he hazarded, this time addressing the younger sister. "I am quite looking forward to it."

Instead of answering him, she sprang up, clapping her hands together. "Ah, my Cremona?" she cried. "Margot, Margot, you have left it behind! Ah! now, indeed, it only remains for me to die!" Tears suddenly leaped to her eyes, and she wrung her hands piteously.

"No, no, it is quite safe," returned Margot eagerly; "I saw the man carry it down myself — it must be here, surely."

Valérie pounced upon the piled-up goods on the opposite side of the omnibus, and dragged the neat heap asunder, overturning Croft's dressing-bag and throwing down his golf-clubs.

"What is the matter?" cried Sir John, looking about him in surprise and alarm; he had not quite caught the drift of Valérie's lamentations.

"My sister cannot find her violin," explained Margot, almost as much perturbed as she. "I am sure I saw the porter put it in; but it is perhaps outside?"

"Outside!" cried Valérie, volumes of wrath and woe in her tone. Then, suddenly letting down the window, she shrieked to the coachman to stop. All was confusion for a moment; but presently the treasure was discovered safely

ensconced behind the coachman's legs, where Sturgess had thoughtfully bestowed it, that there might be more room within the vehicle for his master and his belongings.

"Give it to me!" cried Valérie, almost inarticulately; the tears were rolling down her cheek, and she was quite pale.

Sturgess, immensely astonished, clambered down from his post, and handed in a shabby little black case through the window. Sir John breathed a parting aspiration after him as he retired, and then apologised very humbly to his fellow-travellers for the man's officiousness.

Margot made a pretty and polite disclaimer, but Valérie did not appear to hear. She sat hugging the battered old case tightly in her arms, and occasionally kissing it.

Shortly after this little episode the carriage turned in at a long wooden gate painted black and white.

"Very funereal, is it not?" remarked Sir John. "Black and white are the family colours. It is my aunt's mania to paint everything black and white that can be painted!"

Margot smiled; and John, looking at her, saw that she was pale, and that the small hands



folded on her lap were shaking, doubtless with nervousness. He went on babbling pleasantly in a way which did not require response while they drove along an avenue bordered at each side by black and white railings, and then past a black and white lodge, halting finally before a long white house with a black door.

Croft helped the sisters to alight, observing with pity that the elder one trembled so that she could scarcely stand, and longing to say something reassuring. Valérie, however, appeared quite unconcerned, and continued to clutch her violin, though a footman offered to relieve her of it. In another moment they found themselves in the library, where Lady Mary Bracken and her guests were having tea.

The hostess was a tall old lady, with sandy hair, and a black lace bonnet, worn very much at the back of her head.

"You have come!" she observed, nodding at her nephew; then, to the little sisters, "You have come, too. Why didn't you leave your fiddle in the hall?"

"I preferred to bring my violin in here with me," said Valérie deliberately. "It might be roughly handled by people who did not know."

She looked a very mite among the many tall women present, all of whom were gazing at her curiously; but she did not seem in the least perturbed.

"Well, don't tune it in here, that's all," said Lady Mary; "can't bear the sound of a fiddle being tuned! Now sit down, all of you; I am sure you are tired and must want your tea."

Valérie instantly popped herself down on the nearest chair. Margot looked shyly round, and, finding no other vacant, stood quietly beside her sister.

"You have n't got a chair," cried their hostess, as she returned from the tea-table, bearing aloft two cups. "Here, get up, Rosamond — you have n't had a long journey to-day! Give your chair to Mademoiselle Kostolitz."

The lady addressed — a tall, fair girl with a handsome face, quite sufficiently rouged — slowly hoisted her long languid person from the seat in question; glancing round meanwhile with an expression which had in it as much of insolence as curiosity, but continuing all the time the conversation in which she had been engaged when Lady Mary had addressed her.

Margot sat down. Sir John Croft, who was at that time approaching the sisters with cake and bread-and-butter, saw a wave of colour pass over the face which had been so pale, while the small features assumed a set expression. She was evidently rallying her self-command, and answered him composedly when he made some trivial remark.

"Can I not persuade you, mademoiselle," he said, addressing Valérie, "to let me take care of that violin while you eat your bread-and-butter?"

"I do not trust you sufficiently," she replied, uplifting large defiant eyes.

"I assure you," said Croft, "I am a most reliable person — ask my aunt. Why, I manage the accounts of her charitable institutions for her, sometimes."

"And make up the deficit at the end of the year?" put in the tall girl whom Lady Mary had called Rosamond, gazing calmly at Sir John over the top of Margot's head.

Croft took no notice whatever of the interruption. "I will guarantee," he said pleadingly to Valérie, "to dandle your Cremona as tenderly as if it were a baby!"

"I do not approve of my Cremona being dandled," said Valérie, with a scornful emphasis on the word. "But if you hold it as reverently as — what shall I say? — as your Prayer Book in church, I will entrust it to you!"

"I am not sure that Sir John does not occasionally let his Prayer Book fall in church," observed Lady Rosamond, apparently addressing no one in particular.

At this moment Lady Mary Bracken came fussing up. "Would you like to be introduced?" she asked her nephew in a very audible aside: then, without waiting for an answer, "Sir John Croft, Miss Valérie Kostolitz — the other Miss Kostolitz — I never can remember *your* name — you 'll excuse me."

"We are quite old acquaintances already," rejoined Croft pleasantly.

Valérie threw him a savage glance, but he did not appear to notice it, continuing blandly: "We met at the station, did we not? And drove out in the omnibus together, which is quite sufficient introduction for anybody."

"Nevertheless," said Valérie with a deliberate uptilting of her dimpled chin, which, as he subsequently observed, was a frequent gesture with

her, "it is always more convenient to know a person's name."

Croft bowed, still tenderly nursing the violin, and answered with his most engaging smile: "An introduction is certainly an advantage when one is not a celebrity. Now everyone, of course, has heard of Mademoiselle Kostolitz."

He intended to say something very pretty, but his remark fell disappointingly flat. The two sisters coloured up to the roots of their hair, and his aunt interposed bluntly, "Don't talk nonsense. She has only just come over, and has not been heard of anywhere yet."

Valérie put down her cup, and extended an imperative hand. "My violin, please," she said, drily.

"Give it to her, John; give it to her," cried Lady Mary. "They will want to go upstairs now, and unpack. You'll want to unpack, won't you? Or shall I send my maid?"

Croft, mindful of the colloquy in the railway carriage, and feeling a little sore after his recent rebuff, was conscious of a certain malicious curiosity as to how his fellow-travellers would take the suggestion. With grave dignity, however, and no apparent sign of

embarrassment the elder sister declined the proposal.

" I thought very likely you would n't," rejoined Lady Mary. " People don't care to have strange maids ferreting about among their things, do they? "

The remark was so odd, so blunt, and withal so pertinent, that John Croft actually felt himself blushing. To his surprise and alarm he caught Valérie's eyes fixed on him with an expression of indignant surprise.

II

STACCATO

WHEN Croft entered the drawing-room before dinner he found, to his great satisfaction, that his aunt was alone.

"Just what I wanted," he observed, sitting down beside her on the sofa. "I came down early on purpose to have a chat with you. I know you are always ready ages before everyone else. Now, tell me, who are those nice little people, and why are they here?"

"You mean my fiddling girl — is n't she pretty? Her sister is a nice little thing, too. My dear, they tell me she plays divinely; the other one, I mean. The sister just accompanies her, and looks after her. She seems to manage everything for her; she is the duenna, in fact."

"I see; and how did you come across them?"

"Well, by a curious chance Marian told me. You know my great friend, Mrs. Wilberforce?

My dear John" — suddenly assuming a dolorous tone — "I must tell you affairs have been going dreadfully badly down here. Really, I have had so much worry and bother, and the accounts have got so dreadfully muddled up — "

"What!" interrupted Sir John with a laugh, "does n't the Model Hospital pay? I thought it was doing splendidly."

"My dear boy, it could n't be doing worse. The fact is" — growing voluble and confidential — "the country people here are so stupid they don't understand that kind of thing. They won't go to the hospital because they say the doctors will be playing games with them while they are alive, and cutting them up after they are dead. I assure you, John, one woman said so to me perfectly seriously. It seems a brother of hers had died in a hospital once — she told me all about it — all sorts of details. However, in short, there was a post-mortem, 'And only think, my lady,' she said, 'our poor Tom had to go and meet his God without his inside!'"

John laughed again, and crossed one leg over the other.



"Tell me," he was beginning; but Lady Mary continued, without heeding him:

"Their ignorance is perfectly incredible! Fancy, I asked one of them the other day what she would do if her child burnt itself or got badly scalded; and she said, 'Hold it under the pump!' Does n't that make you shudder? I saw that something must be done, and then I had what was really a splendid idea — the Mothers' Training Guild — is n't it a good name? I have classes, you know, for the village women; ambulance lectures that they can all understand, very simple and easy. They are taught how to bandage an injured limb, how to dress a burn, how to make a sick-bed. Then they have simple lessons in invalid cookery; they learn to steam soles and to make chicken broth —"

"Soles and chicken broth!" repeated John, raising his eyebrows slightly.

"Yes, simple things of that kind. Don't you think it very useful?"

"Most useful and practical, my dear aunt. I suppose the husbands earn about twelve or fourteen shillings a week. Wages are low here, are n't they?"

"I am sure I don't know what they earn. But listen, John," again mounting her hobby and cantering off at full speed. "Then they have lessons in sewing; they are taught how to cut out and make their own clothes and their children's. I supply the stuff, you know, and they are allowed to take the things home after they are made; and I let them have the jellies and soups and things, just to encourage them and give their belongings an idea of how things ought to be done. Well, I assure you, John, this plan was successful from the first; the women simply *flocked* to my classes. After the first fortnight I had to increase my staff of teachers; and the schoolroom — I used to hold my classes in the schoolroom after schooltime, of course — well, the schoolroom would n't hold them all. And I was so proud and so confident, my dear John, that I built a house with a large lecture-room, and kitchens, and a laundry — oh! I forgot to tell you they are taught to wash too — and it is all working splendidly, but —"

"I quite understand," interrupted John, who had been fidgeting during this long explanation. "The financial part of the affair is not



quite so satisfactory as the rest; so you have got up this bazaar and concert, and Mademoiselle Kostolitz is to be one of the attractions."

"Exactly," responded Lady Mary, much gratified at his prompt apprehension of the state of affairs. "You see, having to supply materials for all the departments makes it rather expensive, and the building came to more than I anticipated. Of course, later on, when the Guild is in full working order, it will finance itself. Each member will have to pay an entrance-fee and an annual subscription; but at present I don't want to discourage the poor things."

"I think you are *quite* right," said her nephew, emphatically. "And so you had the happy thought?"

"I had the happy thought of having a concert and theatrical entertainment. You see, I have had so many bazaars; and last time, when I had one for the Night School, it was a dead failure. So I was delighted when Marian Wilberforce wrote and told me she had found something quite new for my entertainment. Stop; I think I have her letter here."

Lady Mary now stalked majestically across

the room, and opened the drawer of a small table.

"Yes, here it is; now I will read it to you: 'I have found the very thing you want — an attraction quite new, and not at all expensive.'"

John felt a sudden pang of pity.

"'I have come across the prettiest little pair of foreigners — French or Hungarian, I am not sure which; the name is Kostolitz.'"

"Certainly that 's not French," said John.

"'One of them is quite a genius,'" continued his aunt, without noticing the interruption; "'she plays the violin divinely, and recites like an angel. They tell me she can act, too, though she does not wish to go on the stage. They have just come to London, and know nobody; therefore now is your time. You could have them for nothing, I know. As the other sister told me, they are most anxious to make a connection. They intend to give lessons at first — one of them does, at least — just to support themselves, until the younger one makes her début in due form. "I want to produce my sister properly," the elder one said to me; "she is a genius." I thought it so quaint of her. You really need not be afraid to have

them. They are quite presentable, and I think very retiring.' "

John arched his eyebrows. This was not the word he would have chosen to apply to Mademoiselle Valérie; though, on the other hand, certainly no one could accuse her of putting herself forward.

"So I just thought I 'd try them," said Lady Mary, folding up the letter and putting it in her pocket. "We 'll make the little one play this evening."

At this moment the door was thrown open and the butler announced, "Mr. Tory."

"The curate," said Lady Mary in a hasty aside. "I asked him on purpose to take one of them into dinner. The other is going in with Algy. He is furious, because he 's afraid he 'll have to talk French. How do you do, Mr. Tory? You know my nephew, Sir John Croft?"

Mr. Tory, a tall gaunt young man, whose habitual terror of Lady Mary Bracken was on this occasion increased by the appearance of this somewhat formidable nephew — John's countenance at that moment bore a distinctly forbidding expression — advanced nervously to

the fireside and made some incoherent remark. John turned suddenly to his aunt.

"I hope Algy will behave himself. I think it is scarcely civil to send one of those girls in with a boy in round jackets."

"He is in tails now," returned Lady Mary —"tails, this half; he is nearly seventeen, you know."

"Can't you let me take her in?" persisted John, discontentedly.

"My dear John, don't be an idiot. You've got to take Rosamond Gorst."

Further discussion was prevented by the entrance of the last-named lady, followed quickly by the other guests. It was a curious fact that, though everybody disapproved of Lady Mary's charitable speculations, she was invariably able to collect as large a party as her house would hold to witness her entertainments for their benefit. She exercised, indeed, an odd empire over all with whom she came in contact. Her bluntness and plain-speaking were proverbial; her *brusquerie* of manner took away one's breath at times, but nobody ever dreamed of being offended with her; and, though people occasionally grumbled, they gen-



erally succumbed to her influence. Not less noticeable than this curious sway of hers was the fact that, whatever strange fancies she might take into her head, however extraordinary her behaviour or rude her speech, no one had ever been known to take a liberty with her. Perhaps this was partly due to the circumstance that she was the daughter of a duke; and though she might occasionally choose to go down on her knees in order to give some slovenly cottage housewife a lesson in floor-scrubbing, and, moreover, frequently wore hobnailed boots that would better have graced a ploughman, she invariably conveyed the impression that she was every inch a great lady.

The Kostolitzes were among the last to enter the drawing-room. Every eye was turned on them as they appeared, and there was a momentary silence. Valérie was dressed in pink and Margot in yellow. Their dresses, though very simple in material, had a certain quaint elegance of make; their pretty hair was fantastically dressed, and adorned with sparkling combs of imitative jewels. As they stood together, in their brightly-tinted dresses, their faces a little flushed and excited, their brilliant

eyes roving round the room, they looked, among the taller, paler country damsels, most of whom were robed in white, like some glowing exotics transplanted into an English garden.

One of Lady Mary's brothers, a somewhat morose-looking personage, did duty as host. It was his son, the Eton boy Algy, who was told off to take Margot Kostolitz in to dinner, while Valéric, who, as a genius, took precedence of her elder sister, was bestowed on Mr. Tory.

Mr. Tory was exceedingly young — a very hobbledehoy among curates, in fact — as yet unmellowed by parish work or croquet; he wore pince-nez with glasses of a bluish tint; he was very shy and preternaturally solemn; and when he advanced to Valérie, jerkily extending an angular arm, his heart was sick within him at the thought of providing conversation for this sparkling little foreigner. Valérie, however, soon put him out of pain. Looking at him critically from beneath her long, dark eyelashes, she inquired with laborious slowness and distinctness:

"Do you — spik — Magyar? — I mean, 'Ungarian?"



With profound alarm and astonishment the youth hastened to reply in the negative.

Valérie raised her plump shoulders with a deprecating shrug, and heaved a deep sigh. Then she slowly shook her head, and proceeded to examine the menu.

John Croft, from the opposite side of the table, witnessed this comedy, and smiled to himself. The naughty perverse little creature! She could speak English as well as anybody when she chose, but she evidently did not choose. Her next neighbour was a local magnate who particularly disapproved, as Sir John knew, of Lady Mary Bracken's charitable speculations, and was of opinion that she was pauperizing the county. He would not be likely to bestow much of his conversation on her foreign importation. Indeed, after one glance of intense disfavour, he turned a large and protesting shoulder upon it. Valérie glanced at him with another shrug, ever so slight, and devoted herself to her dinner. Not one word of any kind did she utter during the progress of that meal. Then what had begun in mischievousness and perverseness ended in sulks. The black brows drew themselves together, the

red under-lip protruded; she would not even eat now, but sat furling and unfurling her fan in as pretty a fit of temper as ever a spoilt child indulged in.

John Croft, leaning back in his chair, looked down the table to see how it fared with the other sister. She had seemed to be enjoying herself at first; Croft had several times caught laughing words and phrases which intimated that she was getting on very well with her Eton boy. Indeed, the latter, who had obeyed somewhat reluctantly his aunt's injunction to give his arm to the second Mademoiselle Thing-um-a-jig, had discovered after five minutes that the latter was a very good sort. As the meal progressed he became quite confidential, and Margot had at first been immensely amused. Now, however, she looked absent, not to say anxious. Once or twice Croft saw her telegraphing little piteous signals to her sister, and observed that she received only stony defiance in return. Once he actually intercepted a grimace. He was endeavouring to observe the consequent effect on Margot, when Lady Rosamond suddenly turned towards him.



"You must crane back your neck a little farther this time," she observed icily; "Lady Lee's head-dress intervenes."

Croft was too self-possessed to start, but was annoyed to feel himself colouring slightly.

"You seem to find the back of that young woman's head very interesting," pursued Lady Rosamond.

"It was not the back of her head in particular — it was her face I wanted to see; but the back of her head is interesting too."

"Especially the glass-beaded comb, I should think."

"Yes, the glass-beaded comb is pretty, and worn as no English girl could wear it."

"I wonder wherein lies the secret of the fascination which these little persons seem to have for you. I have found it most amusing to watch you this evening; when you have not been staring at one, you have been staring at the other."

"So glad you found me amusing," said Croft, lazily.

"Well, but what does their charm consist in?"

"Oh, I don't know. There is something new and fresh and fascinating about them. It

is rather refreshing, don't you think, to come across something new now and then?"

"I am afraid," said Lady Rosamond, archly, "your taste has been vitiated by your long residence in foreign countries. But you have had time to get acclimatised now."

"Oh, I am more than acclimatised," said Croft with a suavely impertinent smile; "I am getting rather bored."

Lady Rosamond was the daughter of Lady Mary Bracken's brother, while Sir John was the nephew of her deceased husband; therefore the two were in a manner connected, and accustomed to meet on intimate terms. It is possible that Lady Rosamond may have desired to become yet more closely connected with the young baronet, who was such a very excellent *parti;* at all events, she was too much interested in him to witness without discomposure his notice of the little foreigners. His last remark necessarily elicited a good deal of natural resentment, and she was about to deliver an exceedingly sarcastic repartee when the ladies rose, and she lost her opportunity.

One of the dowagers dropped her fan in the hall, causing a momentary delay. Valérie and

Margot were thus obliged to halt within the room.

"Qu' as-tu donc, Valérie?" Croft heard the latter murmur. "Tu n'as pas adressé ton pauvre Révérend une seule fois."

"Je le déteste," was the curt and energetic rejoinder.

"Mais songes donc, chérie —"

"Je m'embête ici," muttered Valérie in a fierce whisper; and then the little procession moved on, and Croft closed the door.

On entering the drawing-room, a short time later, he went straight up to the younger sister, whom he found sitting a little apart, all efforts to engage her in conversation having failed. Some of the ladies present had at first endeavoured in a patronising way to make friends with her; one or two had even been so condescending as to address her in exceedingly bad French, oblivious of the fact that she spoke English with great ease and fluency; but Valérie had been obdurate, and responded so curtly that they had transferred their attentions to Margot, who, more than anxious to secure their good opinion on her sister's behalf, had quietly and eagerly responded.

"I want to know," said Sir John, sitting down on the sofa beside Valérie, "how soon you are going to get rid of that little black dog?"

"What little black dog?" — raising her eyes with a swift, unsmiling glance.

"The little black dog who is at present seated upon your shoulder. Don't you know the phrase? It has been familiar to me since my nursery days. We say that a person has a black dog on his shoulder when we mean to imply that he is out of temper."

"How very rude!" said Valérie, with one faint dimple beginning to show at the corner of her mouth. "Why do you think I am out of temper?"

"I am afraid I must again quote the language of the nursery," replied Croft. "Because you are."

"Well, I am," agreed Valérie, nodding, while the dimple was suddenly reinforced by several others.

"Come, you are at least candid," said Sir John. "Now, tell me, why are you out of temper?"

The dimples disappeared, and the frown came back.



"Because I hate this house and everybody in it. My sister would come, though I told her it was a silly idea. Just look round this room, and tell me if a single person here knows anything about music. One lady told me her daughters had grounded with Chopin and Beethoven, and now she was going to have them taught *la Musique de danse*. You should have heard her *la Mewsique de dangse*," with a pitiless imitation of the good lady's strongly British intonation. "These are all stupid, stupid, stupid!"

"Well, I suppose most of them are," said Croft, looking round the room. "Not all, though. There is Lady Rosamond Gorst."

"Bah!" interrupted Valérie; "do not tell me *she* can appreciate music." The colour suddenly flamed over the little creature's face. "In London, at least," she said, "an artist, even though little known, is treated with politeness — is appreciated, in fact. People know you must have something in you to *be* an artist. But these people here — they think, because you have to gain your life, you are something inferior; they think they can take liberties with you."

"Mademoiselle," said Croft gently, "do not be so severe — you frighten me! Let me assure you that I am very fond of music, and that I can appreciate an artist very much." He bent over her as he spoke, until his eyes were almost on a level with hers. There was something frank and engaging in look and tone, even more than in the words, which won Valérie's heart. She looked up smiling; leaning back at the same time, as though prepared to enjoy the conversation. As she did so she unconsciously extended two minute feet encased in dainty bronze shoes. Croft looked down at them, as any other man in his case would inevitably have done, and saw that the little shoes in question were adorned with pretty pink bows.

"So there was time to sew them on, after all," he exclaimed, almost involuntarily.

Valérie sat bolt upright again, gazing at him with a face in which boundless astonishment was mingled with indignation.

"What do you mean?" she cried; "is it possible that you — that you understand Hungarian?"

Croft grew suddenly crimson. "I was some

years Attaché at Vienna," he said humbly. "I am afraid I do understand Hungarian rather well."

Valérie's great dark eyes seemed positively to flame with wrath; the wave of scarlet which had overspread her cheeks swept now over neck and brow.

"Then you — you actually heard what we were talking about in the train!" she exclaimed, in a broken and agitated whisper.

"I understood every word," said John miserably.

"It was dishonourable!" burst out Valérie.

John Croft pulled himself together. "Very good," he said, "we will take that for granted. But just tell me, mademoiselle, what would have been your feelings if, in the middle of your remarks to each other, I had suddenly announced that I was a party to your confidences. Now, candidly, don't you think the situation would have been a little awkward? Remember that I could by no possibility relieve you of my presence, and that unless I had put my fingers in my ears I could not have avoided hearing what you said. I did all I could not to listen, I assure you; I even

crackled my newspaper as hard as I could, to drown the sound of your voices."

Valérie had no small sense of humour, and hereupon she began to laugh.

"I remember your crackling your paper."

John followed up the advantage quickly. "Remember, too, I had no idea that you were coming to stay at Brackenhurst," he pleaded. "It never even occurred to me that we should meet again. Come, don't you think it is rather unjust of you to be angry with me?"

"I am not angry now," said Valérie, becoming calm as suddenly as she had before flared up. "It is rather amusing that you understand Hungarian. Let us talk Hungarian now, and we can say nasty things of everyone here without their knowing it."

But before this amiable little project could be put into execution Lady Mary Bracken marched across the room.

"We want to have a little music," she said. "Where is your fiddle, mademoiselle?"

"I understood the concert was to be to-morrow," said Valérie doggedly.

"Yes, the concert is to be to-morrow, but we hope you will play to us to-night."



"I am tired to-night," returned Valérie, rebelliously.

Margot came flying across the room.

"You will play, ma mignonne," she pleaded caressingly. "Lady Mary Bracken's friends would like to hear you."

Valérie slowly fanned herself, but made no reply.

"Do play," said Sir John, so low that no one but she herself heard; "it will show that you bear me no ill-will"

Meeting his kind, merry gaze, she relented and rose, announcing that she must fetch her violin.

"Shall I send for it?" said Lady Mary. "No, perhaps you would rather fetch it yourself, and then you can tune it upstairs, you know. I can't endure the sound of a fiddle being tuned."

Valérie left the room without appearing to hear her, and presently returned with the violin in its case, walking straight up to Margot, who had already installed herself at the piano.

"Give me the note," she said briefly, proceeding to draw forth a series of excruciating sounds, during which Lady Mary kept up a continuous stream of protests. Then she began

a Russian air with variations. Croft had been prepared for something very good, but he had not expected anything quite so excellent as this. There was no doubt about it: Valérie Kostolitz was a great artist. He marvelled at the power of the little creature. What passion! what fire! While she played she seemed to forget everybody and everything, except her art; her face was transfigured, her eyes dilated; she had even a majesty of bearing with which no one could have credited her. It was as though she were actually uplifted by her own genius. She ceased abruptly, casting a swift glance round — eager, almost appealing.

For a moment there was silence in the room, and then a feeble "Charming!" came from a remote corner. Lady Mary, who had begun by listening very intently — feeling that much would depend on the success of her *protégée* on the morrow — had, before the performance was half over, been accosted by a neighbour, and was now carrying on a brisk conversation in which the words "district nurse" frequently occurred. One lady, looking critically at Valérie through her eyeglass, murmured audibly that she liked something with more tune in it; while an old

gentleman observed that he thought there was nothing like a banjo for a drawing-room — *his* girls were going to learn the banjo, he said. Valérie fixed her eye for a moment on Rosamond Gorst, who languidly returned the glance and proceeded to smother a yawn: then she looked at Croft.

"You at least liked it?" she said interrogatively.

"Yes, I liked it."

"Then I will play for you again, another time. Now these people shall have something they can understand."

She began to play again, Margot, after one scared and bewildered glance, dropping her hands from the piano.

Amid many quaint twirls and flourishes an air that was horribly, ludicrously familiar to Croft sounded through the room.

It was a wonderful performance, no doubt. The variations were admirable, the humour extraordinary. But then the audacity of it! Croft actually felt himself crimsoning. Margot, after a moment, seemed to rally her self-possession, and — infected by her sister's spirit of mockery, it would seem — struck now and then

a quaint chord, which oddly enhanced the grotesqueness of the performance. Nobody was talking now; everyone listened with an astonished, almost startled expression; the old gentleman who had expressed his preference for the banjo as a musical instrument nodded his head in time. Lady Mary was smiling, with a somewhat puzzled air; while Rosamond Gorst stared with haughty surprise at the performers. Presently Valérie with a final roulade ceased, and Lady Mary rose to her feet.

"Thank you very much. That really is pretty — the odd thing is I seem to know it so well."

"I should think everyone knew it," said another lady, somewhat tartly.

"Well, for the moment I actually thought — only, of course, it can't be — "

"It 's ' Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay,' " said Algy, admiringly, from the other side of the room; "jolly tune, is n't it?"

"You silly fellow!" said his aunt. "Seriously, Mademoiselle Kostolitz, there is something which recalls — "

"It *is* ' Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay,' " remarked Valérie, with perfect gravity.



"Dear me!" said Lady Mary; "I thought I recognised it. We all recognised it, did n't we?" — looking delightedly round. "Do you know, really, when one hears it like that it 's a very pretty air. The setting, of course, is a little different — I suppose you set it yourself?"

"Yes," said Valérie complacently, "the arrangement is my own. I thought it would be a good thing to play something which everybody knew."

"Capital idea," said the banjo gentleman.

"The arrangement is very original," said one lady.

"But it is a pity," murmured another, "she should have chosen quite such a vulgar air!"

Meanwhile Valérie stood apparently unconscious of these comments, and somewhat distractedly tuning her violin, to the renewed discomfort of Lady Mary Bracken.

"Valérie, how could you?" murmured Margot under her breath, taking advantage of the renewed buzz of conversation. "See how I tremble! When there is so much at stake!"

"Leave me alone," said Valérie; then, lifting her eyes swiftly to Croft's face, "What did *you* think?"

"If I tell you, you will not be pleased."

"Nevertheless I wish to know."

"Well, then," said Sir John, very gravely, "I thought it somewhat impertinent."

She coloured, but presently shrugged her shoulders. "Impertinent! What a word! I made an experiment qui a, du reste, complètement réussi. Do you not," with a charming smile, "think it kind, after all, to endeavour to adapt oneself to other people's taste, even if one may not comprehend it?"

"Even," said Sir John, who was still grave, and still, oddly enough, appeared to consider himself personally affronted by Valérie's selection, "even if in so doing you yourself are betrayed into a slight lapse from good taste."

"Pour le coup," said Margot, suddenly interfering, "what you say there, Monsieur, is not, it seems to me, of the best possible taste."

But little Valérie's face was dimpling all over with smiles.

"Now you will quarrel, you two," she said, "and really there is no reason for it. Monsieur is offended with me because he thinks I have permitted myself a practical joke. You are offended with him because you think no

one has any right to sermonise me but yourself. I, on the contrary, am offended with nobody. Look at me — I am pleased! Look at them — *they* are pleased! I tell you they like their 'Ta-ra-ra'! Allons, allons, ne vous fâchez pas. Now I will play something for you."

In another moment the preliminary notes of the first movement of the "Kreutzer Sonata" floated through the room. There was no need to command silence now; curiosity had been aroused, and though the performance was of a very different order, its wonderful beauty appealed even to the most prosaic and unmusical person present.

As for Croft, he was absolutely dumb: tears stood in his eyes; it seemed to him that those slender fingers of Valerie's were drawing the heart from out his breast. It was a very dream — never could he have conceived such perfection of tone with a charm so penetrating, so exquisite.

At the close there was real enthusiasm and applause; people pressed round her with congratulations and admiring speeches.

"Thou hast surpassed thyself," said Margot

in an excited tone. Valérie stole one glance at Croft, and smiled a little gratified smile at the emotion still evident in his face.

Handing her violin with a queenly air to her sister, to be restored to its case, she walked up to Lady Mary and dropped a little curtsey.

"I have played three times," she said. "It is enough, I think. I am very tired — I will go to bed."

Whereupon, after shaking hands with her hostess, she made straight for the door, followed by Margot. They saluted the company, right and left, as they passed, with the oddest little stately bows, as if making a royal progress.

III

MOLTO ESPRESSIVO

"DEAR me, there is a great deal to be done to-day," announced Lady Mary, fussily, next morning.

"Do, for goodness' sake, let us have our breakfast in peace!" said her nephew, somewhat irritably; adding, inconsequently, "What is there to be done? The concert is not coming off till this afternoon, is it?"

"Three o'clock," said Lady Mary; "punctually. But the play is to be on Thursday, you know, and we must positively have our first rehearsal this morning. I hope you know your part, John."

"Well, to tell you the truth," returned Sir John, with a careless laugh, "I haven't looked at it yet; but it will be all right. You won't have your rehearsal till twelve, or so, I suppose? I'll have a good go at it before then."

"What part are you going to take?" inquired Valérie, who was sitting opposite.

"Oh, I am always the jeune premier. May I ask why you are so much amused, mademoiselle?" For Valérie suddenly uttered a peal of laughter.

"Ah, you are so funny, you people!" she cried. "I have seen it before. You take the principal part in a piece; you do not even look at it till just before the rehearsal, and then you think you can act it!"

"I hope so," said Sir John, much nettled. "I believe I am supposed to be able to act — am I not, aunt? I know I am bothered often enough to do it."

"He is considered one of the best amateurs in England," responded Lady Mary, who was both astonished and irate. "He never forgets his lines, *never!*"

"He never forgets his lines!" echoed Valérie, still brimming over with merriment. "As if that was the very beginning of it! Ah, these amateurs! See real actors, people who do nothing else but act all their lives, what do they do when about to perform in a new piece? They study, and study, and study! They re-

hearse twice a day for weeks and months beforehand; they practise every detail. But when amateurs set about a piece — 'Oh yes!'" with a quaint unconscious mimicry of Croft's manner. "'The play is to be the day after to-morrow. All right! And the first rehearsal is to be in two hours. Lots of time! They have not looked at their parts yet — but *they'll* be ready!' Ah," suddenly resuming her own tone and manner, "it is comic!"

The colour mounted to Croft's brow: he was young enough to resent being laughed at. Turning suddenly to Margot, who sat beside him, he observed, with a shade of insolence in his tone, "Your sister seems to know all about the stage. Has she, perhaps, thought of adopting it as a profession?"

The little lady drew herself up with dignity.

"My sister's musical career is quite sufficient for her. The reason," she added, colouring, "why she knows so much about the ways of actors is that, many years ago, when my father lived, friends of his, who were on the stage, used to come to our house. Some of them even used to amuse themselves by giving lessons to my sister, who was then a child."

The very simplicity of the explanation made Croft feel unaccountably ashamed of himself.

He observed, in a propitiatory tone, that *that* indeed was an advantage which few amateurs could hope for.

"Such a good thing for us," said Lady Mary. "I hear you both act quite splendidly. They are each to have a part in my piece," she explained, looking round the table.

"Dear me, I feel quite nervous!" said Sir John, and he really was.

Never before had he studied his part so assiduously, and never before was his performance so lame and awkward. His embarrassment augmented during the progress of the rehearsal, for he fancied that every now and then he detected a gleam of amusement in the eyes of Valérie.

In the closing scene it became indeed sufficiently evident that he was a source of very great entertainment to the little violinist, to whom it was his business to make love. She was supposed in this — the climax of the piece — to be convulsed with jealous grief, and he, as the lover, should have been stricken with dis-

may, and have exerted all the tender arts of which he was capable to soothe and reassure her. Sir John duly fell upon his knees, and was beginning his expostulations, much hampered by the endeavour to remember his cues and to be quite sure of his lines. Valérie meanwhile was apparently violently sobbing; but by-and-by he discovered, to his chagrin, that the face behind the handkerchief was dimpling with smiles, and that Valérie's shoulders were heaving, not with sobs, but with suppressed laughter.

"I should really like to know what caused you so much amusement just now," he inquired, when his labours were at length over.

"Because you were so funny," said Valérie, wiping her eyes. "Ah, you cannot think how funny you looked and how drolly you spoke! I must laugh when I think of it! When you said you loved me, you were so stiff, with your English *mauvaise honte*, it was as if you said the grace before meat.'

"How should I have said it?" inquired Croft, with that tinge of impertinence which is so often the resource of the nettled young man.

"If there is time after luncheon," returned

Valérie, without appearing to notice his manner, "and we can find a quiet place in which to exercise ourselves, I will show you."

After luncheon, therefore, while Valérie was standing by an open French window, sipping her coffee, he approached her, reminding her of the project of the morning; pique and curiosity, as well as ever-growing interest, making him determined to secure the promised lesson.

"And the retired place?" she asked, slightly lifting her eyebrows and looking round the crowded room.

"Let us go out into the garden," suggested Croft; "down there, in that far terrace, we shall be most secluded."

"Come then, Margot," cried Valérie, catching her sister by the sleeve; "come, let us give monsieur a *répétition* all to himself."

They slipped unperceived through the window, and hastened to the spot indicated, Valérie in front flying down the smooth sward, and skipping from slope to slope, while Croft and Margot followed more sedately.

"Is this the place?" she asked, tripping through an arch in the tall yew-hedge which bounded the last terrace, and pausing in the



midst of the sunlit enclosure of the other side to clap her hands. "Ah, how beautiful! This is fairyland."

In the midst of the velvet lawn surrounded by the tall closely clipt hedge a fountain splashed lazily in a time-worn stone basin; banks of flowers climbed upwards from the smooth sod to meet the hedge, and at the further end the quaint rustic door of a thatched summer-house stood invitingly open.

After flitting round these charming premises, and taking note of all that was to be seen, Valérie suddenly became businesslike.

"Now, Margot, take the book," she cried. "You must tell us when we go wrong — or, rather, when monsieur goes wrong; he is not as yet quite perfect in his part. Ah, this little house might have been made on purpose; I will sit here. Now you come in; you find me tout en pleurs, your heart has melted, and you endeavour to console me — is it not so? Let us begin — I am weeping, you see. *Alas! alas! that he should be so cruel!* . . . Now, then, why do you not come?"

"What is it I say?" inquired Croft, in an agonised whisper, of Margot.

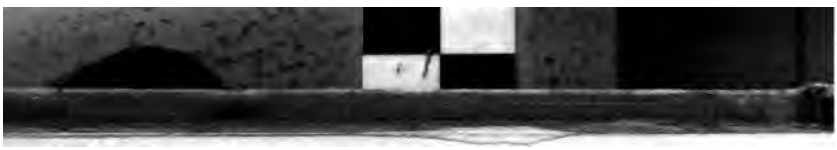
Margot hastily referred to the page. "You say, *Cecilia crying — really crying! Is it possible that, after all, she has a heart?*"

"Oh yes, of course; I forgot," said Croft, proceeding quickly, "*Cecilia crying — really crying.*"

Here he lurched violently against one of the rustic tables in the summer-house, and paused to move it out of his way — "*Is it possible that, after all, she has a heart? Cecilia darling, can this be for me?* I beg your pardon, mademoiselle; but I cannot possibly fall on my knees here — there isn't room."

"Do you suppose," said Valérie, whisking round so as to face him, "that if you were really and truly very much — how do you say? — in love, you would first of all think about a table, and afterwards hesitate as to a convenient spot for kneeling down? But there — we will put the chair on to the lawn, where there is plenty of room, and you can try again. Now, remember, you must not think of anything in the world but me!"

Croft glanced at her hastily; he himself was very much excited, but there was not the slightest shade of coquetry in her face or manner.



He felt that he was losing his head a little, and in his anxiety to pull himself together, and avoid a warmth which might offend her, he assumed a casual and nonchalant air which drew down a severe reprimand.

"This will really never do," she said; "you have not the beginning of an idea of the part. Margot, I think you and I must show him. I will be the lover, see; and you must be Cecilia. Now: *the lover enters and finds Cecilia weeping.*"

Never in his life had Croft seen so curious and pretty a performance. Valérie was a very wonder. Her quaint assumption of the emotions of the strong man, the passion which mastered the previous jealousy, and then the sudden change to tenderness, filled Croft with amused admiration. But presently he found himself watching the other sister with, if possible, greater interest. Her rendering of the heroine's part was pretty — almost perfect in its way; and yet what most struck the young man was the fact that for her the personality of her sister was never for an instant effaced. She uttered the coquettish lines assigned to her with a kind of sweet indulgence infinitely touching; she suffered herself to be conquered by her ardent

little lover, and spoke heartfelt words of tenderness in return; but it was sisterly love which shone in her eyes, it was Margot Kostolitz who at the close enfolded her little Valérie with caressing arms, not Cecilia sinking into the embraces of her admirer.

"You must try and do it like that," said Valérie, rising at length and wiping away real tears. "Just like that, with true fire and feeling. You are quite desperate about Cecilia, you know."

Croft did not answer: he was moved, and excited, and puzzled. Valérie's advice surprised him, but the absolute simplicity with which it was delivered prevented his vanity from being tickled in the smallest degree. It was solely from an artistic point of view, and with the most disinterested motives, that she desired him to throw more energy into his fictitious love-making.

While he was considering her, without speaking, she suddenly slipped past him, sliding her feet daintily along the velvet sward.

"How deliciously smooth it is!" she cried. "The fairies might dance here! Ah, the good idea — this is the fairies' ball-room. Look,

monsieur, I will show you what they do when the moon comes out, and all the birds are gone to bed, and the dew comes down softly, softly, to kiss the flowers in their sleep."

While speaking she had been gathering and arranging some large roses, placing the stalks between her fingers so that the heads drooped downwards.

"See," she cried, "these are the fairy castanets. They are dumb for us, poor dull mortals; but when the fairies dance, they make exquisite music. Now, Margot, since the fairies are not here, you must sing for me."

Margot obeyed, her voice being sweet and low-pitched, but not very powerful; and, flinging her arms above her head, and feigning to rattle her scented castanets, Valérie began to dance. It seemed to John Croft that this performance of hers was even more full of beauty and poetry than her music. The buoyant graceful figure seemed scarcely to touch the ground, the lovely little face was uplifted in ecstasy, its expression changing every moment; each movement, full of new grace and charm, seemed to convey a fresh surprise to the onlooker. She was a dream — a poem in herself. There was,

indeed, something so unusual, so unreal, in the whole scene, that Sir John could hardly believe he was gazing at it with actual bodily vision. The beauty of the spot, full of light and bloom, made a fit background for this airy figure. The sunlight glorified her white dress; the petals of the roses, loosened by the rapid motion, floated round her; the soft tendrils of her hair, catching the light as she moved, made a shifting, varying nimbus.

He watched her, holding his breath. All too soon she stopped, with a little laughing curtsey.

"Now we must go and get ready for our concert," she said.

"Ah, mademoiselle," cried Croft eagerly, "if you would but dance after the play to-morrow, you would bring down the house!"

Valérie burst out laughing. "Think how it would look in the playbills!" she cried. "*Mademoiselle Valérie Kostolitz will execute a* pas seul *of her own composition.*"

"You are talking nonsense, Valérie," interrupted Margot, severely; then, turning towards Sir John with flashing eyes, she continued: —

"You are quite mistaken in supposing, sir,



that my sister would ever consent to dance in public. Indeed, I cannot conceive what has now led her to indulge in this *enfantillage*."

"Ta, ta, ta, my little sister!" cried Valérie; "if I danced, you also sang."

"There is nothing to laugh at," returned Margot, still with hot cheeks and angry eyes; "you should not talk as you do — you should not behave as you sometimes do. You make people imagine strange things."

Valérie became suddenly quite meek and subdued. "Of course I was only joking," she explained; "naturally I should never think of dancing in public."

"And, indeed," interposed Croft, taking the reproof to himself, "I assure you I never imagined anything at all. I merely made the suggestion — which I now see was a foolish one — because I thought it a pity that other people should not be as much delighted as I."

But Margot was not to be appeased: she began to walk towards the house, her small figure very erect, her head thrown back.

"Mademoiselle Valérie Kostolitz is a musician," she observed presently, "a musician and nothing else."

"Mais certainement," agreed Valérie, still meekly.

To Croft's surprise the meekness was quite genuine. The parts appeared to be reversed; it was the elder sister who now required to be propitiated.

When, an hour later, however, they appeared on the platform of the Brackenhurst Town Hall, her face had resumed its customary expression of patient, tender watchfulness.

The first item of the programme had been a glee, sung more or less correctly by the members of Lady Mary's village choir; a performance which had given the greatest possible satisfaction to the relatives of those concerned, while it had called forth a good deal of adverse criticism from those among the audience who were interested in other choirs. Then a lusty young doctor from the neighbourhood had sung a rollicking sea-song in a prodigious bass voice. Valérie, who succeeded him, looked oddly out of place; and the audience scarcely appreciated the excellence of her rendering of one of Brahm's dances. Some genuine music-lovers did indeed applaud vehemently, and make frantic endeavours to obtain a recall, but the

greater number of those present were anxious for the next tit-bit of the musical bill of fare — namely, the advent of "A Gentleman of the Town," who had promised a nigger song in character. Therefore, when the Kostolitzes had retired, trembling with excitement, shrieks of delight greeted the appearance of this personage, who, exceedingly jocular, with blackened face and enormous collar, proceeded to announce in a cracked voice that "there was something very funny in his rummy-tum-tum."

He was encored, it need not be said; indeed, no doubt the "Gentleman of the Town" made the hit of the evening, though when the two Misses Brown-Jones (daughters of Canon Brown-Jones), appropriately attired in the Italian peasant costumes which they had worn at last year's Hunt Ball, warbled "The Danube River," it was universally acknowledged that they ran him very hard. Then it was Valérie's turn again. She played a "Légende" of Wieniauski's with exquisite charm and grace, and again was applauded rapturously by a few, tolerantly by many, impatiently by the rest, and no encore.

When she had withdrawn, she looked at her sister; her eyes were full of tears, her lips pale.

"I will not play again," she cried; "I have done with these people!"

"But, Valérie! I implore you; your name is down again twice — dear, everything must have a beginning. When they know you, they will appreciate you."

"I will *not* go back," said Valérie; "it kills me."

"Oh, chérie, chérie, think if all this — if our visit results in complete failure — if Lady Mary Bracken and her friends are offended! I beg of you, conquer yourself!"

"No," said Valérie doggedly; she had put away her violin in its case, and now sat down folding her hands. "Decidedly I play no more; it is finished."

Pale and aghast, Margot stepped to the side of the stage, and made signs to Sir John, who was sitting at the end of the front row.

"What is to be done?" she cried agitatedly; "my sister will not play again. She says she cannot — oh, what an audience this is! Please, please, intercede for us with your aunt, that she may not be too angry — tell her I will play — sing — anything —"

"Why do you not desire your sister to play?"



asked Croft. "She seems to mind what you tell her, generally."

"No, no. In a question like this it would be hopeless — nothing would move her. Ah, monsieur, you do not know what it is to be the duenna of a genius!"

Sir John made his way towards his aunt, and informed her, mendaciously, that Mademoiselle Kostolitz had been taken suddenly ill, and was, indeed, feeling so faint that it would be impossible for her to appear again that afternoon; her sister, he added, would, however, be delighted to take her place.

Lady Mary was much concerned. "Poor thing!" she cried, "I daresay she feels the room stuffy, — it *is* stuffy, you know. Look here, John, do take her to the Training Institute; they 'll know what to do for her there — they 'll look after her, and give her sal-volatile, and all that. Tell her it does not in the least matter about her not playing any more. We 'll manage very nicely — I am sure the Brown-Joneses will sing again, and Mr. Brooks will bring out his banjo. Do you know that is Brooks the ironmonger? Does n't he do it well? All the people are delighted!"

So while the Misses Brown-Jones fluttered gently "Through the Woods," entirely to the satisfaction of the audience, and Mr. Brooks repeated the refrain "Jam, jam, jam," till his already cracked voice threatened to be extinguished altogether, Sir John, after hastily explaining to Margot the subterfuge of which he had been guilty, escorted the Sisters Kostolitz to the open air, and put them into a cab.

"You had better drive straight home," he said. "You can tell Lady Mary that you preferred to go back and rest."

Valérie did not hear him. She had flung her arms round Margot's neck, and burst into a passion of tears. "Ah, Margot, Margot," she sobbed, "I have failed — I have failed. No one believes in me but you!"

IV

CAPRICCIOSO

MARGOT announced to her hostess that evening that her sister was still too much indisposed to come down to dinner. Lady Mary was full of sympathy and kind suggestions on Valérie's behalf; there was nothing conceivable, indeed, which she did not offer to the invalid, from champagne to a hot bottle. Margot, however, would only permit a cup of soup.

"And even that she will not drink," she said in an undertone to Sir John Croft, who was standing by. "When Valérie is like that, she will touch nothing. She is lying on the floor in her room, and she will speak to no one."

"Surely," said Sir John, "she is taking the matter too much to heart. After all, her playing was as much appreciated as she could expect in a place like this, and with such an audience. If they prefer the gigantic collars of Mr. Brooks, the ironmonger, to your sister's

exquisite playing, their bad taste is a thing to be laughed at, not to weep over."

"To be laughed at!" repeated Margot, with a quivering lip. "If you knew how we counted on that concert! The preparations we made! How she looked forward, the poor little thing! to what we thought would be a triumph! And now — oh, I cannot bear to think of it! — now we must begin all over again. This has not advanced us one bit, and it is so hard to make one's way all alone in your big London.. Nobody knows us, nobody will help us — we two have to fight our own battles, and sometimes it is very hard work."

At this moment the signal was given for moving in to dinner, and Croft was reluctantly obliged to leave Margot's side, and escort a particularly uninteresting dowager.

Throughout the repast he was even more abstracted than on the previous evening. The vision of little Valérie lying on the floor, weeping, and refusing to be comforted, haunted him painfully. What a contrast between the picture thus conjured up, and that which had so pleasantly lingered in his mind during the afternoon! — that sunny, laughing image, with



white draperies so gracefully swaying, and rose-leaves floating downwards from her uplifted hands. Every now and then he looked across the table at Margot, her pale face and dejected air filling him with compassion. Her outburst of confidence had moved him deeply. Not often, he fancied, did this proud and self-possessed young woman permit herself to speak of the struggles of her lot; and what struggles they were! Poor little Babes in the Wood! how could they hope to find their way in the great wilderness where fate had thrown them? And yet, no doubt, Valérie only required to be known, to be heard in the right places and by the proper people, to make a name for herself. He must have another talk with Margot, and see what could be done. Surely they must have *some* friends — they could not have come to London without any introductions whatsoever. He would speak to his aunt very seriously. If she had taken these little people up, she must not drop them. If she would write about them to those hosts of friends of hers, it would at least help to make them known. He himself would try what he could do in that way. If they wanted pupils, he would find them

some. Here Croft, much pleased at the idea of enacting the part of the Fairy Godmother, smiled a beneficent smile to himself, and then, glancing at Margot, felt almost irritated with her for looking so sad.

After dinner, Margot went upstairs to see her sister, but had returned and was seated in the drawing-room when Croft entered it.

"How is Mademoiselle Valérie?" he inquired, sitting down beside her.

"I do not know; her door was locked, and she would not let me in."

"Is n't that rather naughty of her?" asked Sir John.

"She is like that," answered Margot, with a defected little shrug of her shoulders; adding presently, "It has gone deep with her."

"Are you two talking about the concert?" inquired Lady Mary, passing by. "Your sister played charmingly," nodding across at Margot, "and did n't the Brown-Jones girls look nice? It was my idea their wearing those Italian peasant dresses — pleases people, you know. Every one was delighted! Altogether my concert was a very great success."

She passed on, evidently under the impres-



sion that she had said a pleasant thing; and Margot looked at Sir John.

"A success!" she said.

"Come, you must not be so downhearted," returned Sir John, kindly, if a little vaguely. "All will come right in time. Your sister only requires a fair hearing — once known, she cannot fail to be appreciated."

"But the difficulty is to get known. We knew no one when we came. We have made a few acquaintances now, but even they," with a little sigh, "are not of the sort I want."

"Good heavens!" said Croft, half involuntarily, "what induced you to come to London?"

Margot drew herself up. "I have always wished my sister to make her début in London," she said, a little stiffly; adding hurriedly, "We shall do very well after a little time. It must take time, of course; but we have already a small connection, and soon we shall have more pupils."

"Ah! you take pupils," said Croft, thoughtfully. "Of course, I had forgotten! Will you accept me as a pupil?"

She looked up suspiciously, but he was quite serious.

"I should like to learn the violin," he pursued.

Margot burst out laughing.

"Are you only thinking of beginning now? I fear, it is a little late."

"Then," said Sir John, "I will take a course of singing lessons. I have a voice, I assure you — quite a nice one, people tell me — and I have had some lessons before, but I never had time to go in for it seriously."

"Everything is worth doing seriously, if you do it at all," said Margot, gravely. "Have you time to study music now? Because, otherwise, I should not care to teach you."

"I have time now," said Sir John; "I have more time than I know what to do with. But when I first went in for music I was really rather a busy man — well, busy for a man, you know, — a young man."

"What did you do?" — still seriously.

"Well, I was in diplomacy, you see, and I entertained wild dreams of making a mark in the world. I had mapped out a career for myself — Lord knows all I was going to do! I used to study and read and write all kinds of things which I thought might possibly one day help me to get on in the world. And so," break-



ing off with a light laugh, "I really did not have much time for music."

"And now?" said Margot, with a little interrogative lifting of the eyebrows.

"Oh! now I am a man of leisure. My uncle was kind enough to die a few years ago in the most unexpected manner, and I have stepped into his shoes. There is no need for me to work now."

"No need!"

"No; I am perfectly comfortable. I never want to be any better off than I am; so why make a slave of oneself?"

"Then you work no more at anything? Oh, what a life! If I were a man, no matter how rich I might be, I would still aim at making a mark in the world. I would have a career, I would do something with my life! To be idle — to do nothing, because you are rich enough — what a miserable view of existence!"

"Don't!" said Croft, reddening; "you are so dreadfully energetic you make me feel quite uncomfortable."

"If I were a man," went on Margot, without heeding, "and a rich man like you, what would I *not* do! You are, I suppose," looking at him

with a quaintly contemplative air, "not much more than thirty, and yet you have calmly made up your mind to settle down to a life of idleness. You should be ashamed."

"I am ashamed!" said Croft, meekly. "I am going to begin my new career by learning singing. Will you, or your sister, teach me?"

"I will teach you," said Margot quickly, and with he fancied, a shade of hauteur. "My sister does not give lessons."

"I will come and see you in town, then, if I may," said the young man; "and we can settle all about it then. But, do you know, I am almost afraid of you; you are so severe!"

"I fear I was rather rude," said Margot, "but I feel strongly on that point. I have worked so hard all my life, but there is so little I can do — when I see people who could do much, and will not try, it makes me angry."

At this moment Lady Mary Bracken invited Margot to go to the piano. They wanted to have a little dancing in the hall, she said. "Would Mademoiselle Kostolitz be so kind as to play?"

Mademoiselle Kostolitz was, of course, delighted, and Sir John was borne off by his aunt

to do his share of the entertainment. Later in the evening he informed Margot that he had for once worked hard enough to please even her, having danced with six damsels, all as heavy as lead and as stupid as owls.

Next morning Valérie breakfasted in her room; Margot seemed anxious and ill at ease, and Sir John Croft, fancying that he detected a kind of mute appeal in her eyes, took his place beside her at table, presently inquiring, "What is the matter? Has not your sister recovered herself yet?"

"I am in such a difficulty," said Margot, speaking low and hurriedly. "Valérie is packing."

"Packing! Does she mean to go away to-day, then?"

"Yes, at once — directly after breakfast."

"But she cannot," said Croft, decidedly. "There is the play to-night. She cannot leave before that!"

"I know; I have told her," said Margot, sorrowfully, "but she will not listen. She says she is miserable in this place, and that she could never face these people again."

"Is not that somewhat unreasonable?" in-

quired Sir John. "My aunt will be very much hurt if she upsets all her arrangements at the last moment, and prevents the play from taking place. After all," with gathering irritation, "it is not Lady Mary's fault that the people about here are so," he hesitated for an epithet, "so turnip-headed."

"I know — I know," agreed Margot, deeply distressed. "I have said everything I can think of, but she will not listen. She has packed her own box, and now she is packing mine."

Sir John knit his brows. "I confess I do not understand you, mademoiselle. I know that, when you like, you can make your sister obey you; now you apparently wish me to believe that you have no authority over her."

"No; you do not understand," returned Margot, almost tearfully. "When Valéric is quite herself, I can almost always manage her; but every now and then she takes a fit, a freak — I do not know what you call it — and then she will go her own way in spite of me. She is often sorry afterwards, *par exemple;* but then the mischief is done."

"The mischief will be considerable this time," said Croft. "There will be a fine row when



my aunt hears you are going. Naturally she will talk — she is rather a good hand at that — and her friends will talk, and will do your sister a great deal of harm. Seriously, you must make her change her mind."

He was very much in earnest — and, moreover, exceedingly annoyed. He had on the previous evening devoted much time and thought to the maturing of certain benevolent plans for the benefit of these young people, but for the furtherance of most of these schemes he had counted upon Lady Mary's aid; and this foolish, wilful, touchy little genius was going to draw down upon herself the implacable wrath of that lady and her following.

"Tell your sister she must not go away," he said; adding, as Margot replied by an exasperating little shrug, "Look here, I will speak to her myself. Just tell her I want to say one word to her — ask her if she will come down for a moment to the terrace."

Breakfast being over, Margot went in search of her sister, whom she found wrestling with the strap of her trunk. On hearing Sir John's request Valérie paused for a moment, frowning. "What does he want me for?"

"How should I know?" returned Margot, with a deprecatory gesture. "You had better go and ask him."

"I warn you," said Valérie, looking very determined, "that I will not be persuaded to remain — my mind is quite made up. Go and tell Lady Mary Bracken that we return to town to-day, and ask at what time a train leaves."

"C'est bon, c'est bon," said Margot, composedly. "Meanwhile go and speak to Sir John."

She sat down on the bed while Valérie went downstairs, but, in spite of her assumption of unconcern, she listened with a very anxious heart for her sister's returning footsteps. At last they sounded in the passage without, rapid and bounding. The door was thrown open, and Valérie appeared, her face wreathed in smiles.

"We remain," she announced.

Margot was careful not to express too much satisfaction.

"Ah, you have changed your mind," she said quietly.

"Sir John has changed my mind," returned Valérie. "He is very amusing — Sir John. Decidedly I like him — it is because I like him that

I remain. Do not make such big eyes, my Margot! See, I am quite in a good humour again. I am no longer spleenée. Now, if you want to be very nice, you will unpack those great big boxes again. You see, I am so tired — so tired! It was such hard work getting everything in; so now you, my little sister, may take your turn, and pull everything out again. Du reste, it is much easier."

"O Valérie, Valérie," said Margot, with a smile, half reproachful and half tender, "you will always be a child."

"And you will always be a grandmother," cried Valérie, dancing round her. "No, a grandfather — a patriarch; that is more venerable still — Patriarch Margot! Tiens! it is an idea that. I will call you my patriarch, my Bon-papa. You remember in 'Le Petit Chose' how the hero calls his brother 'La mère Jacques'? I thought the idea so pretty — I love that book, though you would not let me finish it because you said it was not for young girls. So now I shall call you Grandfather Margot. Au revoir, Bon-papa. I am going downstairs to make Sir John rehearse. He was so funny about the rehearsal; if you had heard

him, you would have laughed! He said, if I went away, his career as an actor would come to an end — he is funny, with his career! If he depended on acting for his daily bread, I think he would starve, poor man! Now I am going downstairs to teach him to say 'I love you, Cecilia,' in tones a little less icy than those he used yesterday. Meanwhile, you can unpack the trunks."

"I will come too," said Margot, quickly; "the trunks can wait. You will want me to prompt for you."

"Oh, as for that, I know his part and mine too. Let us see — how does it go? *Cecilia, from the first moment I saw you, I felt my heart flame.* O Margot, do you remember how he said it yesterday? It might have been the multiplication table! But now I am going — no; no, you need not come; I think he will be less shy if we are alone. Besides, I do want you to get those boxes out of the way."

Instead of unpacking the boxes, however, Margot sat quite still, after her sister left her, looking puzzled and perturbed. The suddenness with which, at the instance of Sir John, Valérie had made the concession previously so

persistently refused, startled the anxious little sister. She was even conscious of a twinge of jealousy — this stranger had prevailed where she had failed. Then Valérie's beaming face, her repeated announcements that she liked Sir John, her suggestion that he would be less shy without Margot's presence, all roused vague feelings of alarm and disquietude. As Margot sat upon the bed, her small slight hands clasped round her knees, she began to wonder if she had done well to confide in this man. After all, what did she know of him? He was certainly kind and good-natured, and apparently anxious to befriend them; but was not this sudden display of interest on the part of a perfect stranger in itself a little suspicious?

Margot coloured and bit her lips as she thought of their conversation on the previous evening. She had talked to him of their struggles, their poverty — why had she been so foolish? What could she suppose a handsome, careless young *flâneur* like Sir John Croft could care about the hardships of two poor little unknown artists? Her recital had doubtless merely aroused a kind of vague curiosity and interest. This idle young man had been idly amused by

the glimpse of a mode of life so unlike his own. Yes, he had been amused! He had amused himself by proposing first to learn the violin! To learn the violin! The violin! At thirty! Surely that alone might have shown her how little in earnest he was. Then he had said he would take singing lessons — from Valérie. He was now acting with Valérie; in fact, he was amusing himself with the child. As this thought struck Margot she jumped off the bed, and, without heeding the unpacked boxes, ran hastily downstairs and out of the house, making her way at once to the green enclosure where the private rehearsal of yesterday had taken place. As she approached she could hear voices — Sir John declaiming with far more vigour and energy than before, and Valérie laughing and commending.

When Margot appeared under the arch in the yew hedge, Sir John rose rather hastily from his knees, and Valérie jumped up from the rustic chair on which she had been sitting, and clapped her hands.

"My pupil is making progress," she cried; "il avance à grands pas! Ah, je t'assure, nous avons bien travaillé — have we not, Sir John?

You should hear him say he loves Cecilia *now!* It is quite another thing."

Margot glanced anxiously and inquiringly at Sir John; it struck her that he looked rather foolish.

"Since this gentleman is now perfect in his part," she said coldly, "it strikes me that you had better come back to the house. You have not yet seen Lady Mary Bracken, remember; and she has been most kindly inquiring about you."

Valérie made a little pouting grimace. "It is so nice out here," she said.

"The general rehearsal will take place immediately."

"Bon," said Valérie, "let us go to the general rehearsal. Do not forget my instructions, Mr. Pupil."

She darted through the hedge, and danced before them along the terrace.

What a child she was! She could not have been more unconcerned if Sir John Croft had been a little boy of five years old. He amused her; but then, in certain moods, a little boy of five years old would also have amused her. But Sir John? It was very evident that Valérie

amused him. Was the game on his part as simple and innocent as on hers?

At the subsequent rehearsal this much at least was evident — Croft had much benefited by Valérie's instructions. No one who now heard him declare his passion for Cecilia could doubt its depth and sincerity. He fell upon his knees in the most natural way in the world; and when Cecilia wept, he dried her tears with all the tenderness conceivable. Poor Margot alone did not rejoice in Sir John's prowess; everyone else was delighted.

"I always told you my nephew was an excellent actor," said Lady Mary; "but really, this time, I think he surpasses himself. He looks the part so well, doesn't he? The beau idéal of a young lover!"

The success of the play was colossal. Every place was taken, and still people crowded in. Lady Mary at first disturbed the equanimity of the performers by issuing sundry directions in a loud whisper:

"Move up, move up — You can get in two or three more there — Bring up a few more benches — Those people at the end will have to stand up, that's all."

But when she once could be induced to sit down, and leave off crackling her programme, everything went smoothly. The applause was vociferous. At the end of each act Cecilia and her lover were called before the curtain; and at the conclusion they were obliged to return three times, and received quite an ovation.

When Sir John at length led Valérie off the stage, he inquired, looking down at the radiant face beside him, and involuntarily pressing the little fingers which he still held:

"Does not this triumph satisfy you? I think it should make up for your disappointment of the other day."

The fingers were immediately withdrawn, and the face clouded over.

"Ah," she said, "this is quite another thing; this is play, but my music is my life."

The actors, still in their theatrical gear, joined the rest of the company at supper. As was natural, the hero and heroine of the piece were seated side by side; their health was drunk, and everyone was very merry. Valérie seemed to have forgotten her momentary sadness, and was the merriest of all. She was more than merry; she was wild. She spoke of herself as

Cecilia, and called Sir John her fiancé. Margot, separated from her by half the length of the table, vainly tried to check her by warning glances; but Valérie would not heed. The young duenna's face grew haggard with anxiety beneath its rouge and powder; she was on thorns.

The child meant nothing — no one knew that better than she; but what would other people think? It was so important for Valérie in her position to be prudent, to avoid drawing down upon herself censorious criticism.

"Luckily we are leaving to-morrow," she said to herself, over and over again, while Valérie laughed and talked nonsense.

But when next morning Sir John put her and her sister into the carriage which was to convey them to the station, Valérie startled her by suddenly leaning forward.

"Our number is twenty-eight," she cried; "don't forget! You promised to come and see us, remember — Twenty-eight! Au revoir."



V

GIOCOSO

THE sisters Kostolitz had installed themselves in a small furnished house in Pitt Street. All the houses in Pitt Street are small, but this one seemed to be the tiniest of all. There was scarcely room for two people to stand abreast in the hall, or rather passage, into which the front door opened; and the stairs were so narrow that any but very slender people were obliged to ascend them sideways, walking in crab-like fashion. The oilcloth which covered stairs and passage was very much frayed at the edge and totally destitute of pattern. This oilcloth was Valérie's despair.

"It jumps to the eyes," she would say; "no one coming to the house could fail to notice it, Margot, my dear; it will need all our fascinations to efface the impression it must produce."

It was impossible that the little rooms upstairs should not bear some impress of the per-

sonalities of their temporary owners: yet the general effect was incongruous and somewhat peculiar. The sisters had a few valuable possessions, evident remains of better days. There were four or five really good pictures, including a half-length portrait of a beautiful woman, easily recognisable as the girls' mother from the likeness to Margot; there was a magnificent Erard piano, which almost filled the little front drawing-room; and there was a fine Vernis-Martin writing-table. But the floor was covered with a cheap red matting, and the rest of the furniture was of the poorest and most meagre description. The most comical effect, however, was produced by Valérie's attempts at adornment. Like many artists, she was curiously wanting in what ordinary people would call good taste; so long as she had colour and variety, she did not care how many incongruous objects she assembled together. Thus she had set her heart upon draping the double doorway which separated their two small reception-rooms with a *portière*.

"I must have a *portière*, Margot," she said; "a blue plush *portière*. This room positively screams for a blue *portière*."

"And where do you propose to find the money for one?" asked prudent Margot; "a good plush as wide as that would cost nearly ten shillings a yard."

Valérie was, however, quite sure that a cheaper material could be had; and after much pondering over advertisements and excursions to different shops, she one day electrified her sister by announcing that she had found the very thing.

"Read this!" she cried, thrusting a newspaper into her hands. "See here: *Portières complete with solid brass rod and fittings, plushette any shade, 7s. 6d.* What do you say to that? — *7s. 6d.* will not ruin us, will it?"

"They cannot be good at that price," said Margot. "Plushette — what is plushette?"

"Plushette is, without doubt, a sort of plush," cried Valérie, still joyfully. "Besides, plushette or plush, what does it signify? We shall have our blue *portière*, and that is the essential."

The *portière* was got — by the bye, two *portières* were found to be necessary, as those advertised were only wide enough to fit a very

narrow door — and Valérie, mounting upon a table, put them up herself. The plushette was not exceedingly rich in texture, and somewhat scanty in dimensions — but when you pulled the curtains very hard, they nearly joined in the middle; and when you fastened them back with a nice blue cord and tassel, no one could see that they were not lined, or was likely to notice that they did not touch the ground. Valérie was charmed, and the room apparently left off screaming. There were, besides, sundry arrangements in Madras muslin and a collection of glass and china ornaments which were also due to Valérie. Margot's taste was much more simple and severe; but she allowed her sister to do as she liked — it amused her and kept her occupied. She only interfered when Valérie wished to introduce some startling or *bizarre* effect in the adornment of her own small person.

"No, no," she would then say, firmly, "this is my department. You may deck the house, but I will deck you."

After their return from Brackenhurst Valérie displayed a sudden new energy.

"Now," she said, with a whimsical smile,

"that we have made so many new acquaintances, and may expect so many fashionable people to come and see us, we must be prepared for them. Margot, that wall-paper is hopeless. Nothing can be done to that wall-paper."

It was, indeed, a particularly ugly specimen of the cheap and dingy design common in houses of the Pitt Street stamp.

"The only thing to be done," pursued Valérie, "is to cover it up as much as ever we can. Margot, have we got any money?"

"A little," said Margot.

"Then come out. We will buy some more Madras muslin, and some little china plates and Japanese fans."

Margot sighed. More Madras muslin! Nevertheless, if it only kept Valérie from thinking about Sir John, what did it matter with how much rubbish she filled the room? So Valérie dragged her from one shop to another, being invariably charmed with the wonderful effect of the cheap and showy articles in the windows, and somewhat disappointed when admitted to a nearer inspection. She was very busy with scissors and needle for many days

afterwards, though, as a matter of fact, she was extremely awkward with both, for her little fingers were clumsy when they attempted to manipulate anything unconnected with her art; then hammer and nails were brought into requisition, and Margot submitted to the noise and bustle and the general transformation of the little room. The only time she felt inclined to protest was when Valérie tied bows of blue ribbon on the hooks which supported their pictures; but the sight of the little woman's triumph as she surveyed her handiwork disarmed her.

"Il me faut du joli," said Valérie, walking up and down the room with her hands behind her; then, suddenly wheeling round, she inquired, "What will Sir John Croft think of this when he comes to see us?"

"Ma mignonne," said Margot, very gently, "do not imagine that he will come to see us. My dear, young men are like that; they say a thing and they do not mean it. By this time he has probably forgotten our very existence."

"But I tell you he will come," cried Valérie, not in the least disconcerted. "I know him better than you do. He will come and sing,

Do—ré—mi, &c. You will have your most solemn face on, but he will be looking round all the time to see if I am laughing."

Weeks passed, however, and Sir John did not come; but one day an immense hamper of game arrived, with his compliments, for "Mademoiselle Kostolitz." Valérie's delight was unbounded. She insisted on opening the hamper there and then, and spreading out its contents on the floor.

"Three, four pheasants," she cried, "and two hares! Dame! Sir John does not do things by halves. How does he suppose two little persons like us will get through all that? They are superb — did you ever see so much game in your life before, Jane?" she inquired, addressing the little maid-of-all-work, who was looking on open-mouthed.

"Never — except in the shops, miss."

Valérie laughed and clapped her hands. Then she began to pull out some of the pheasants' long tail feathers. "Now you can take them all away again; put them back in the hamper carefully, and don't drop it on your way downstairs."

Jane retired, groaning and protesting that it

was as much as she could do to lift the hamper; and Valérie skipped back into the drawing-room, and began to stick the feathers upright in her hair.

"Look at me, Margot," she cried presently, exploding with laughter. "I am an Indian chief. I am Plume d'Aigle, the chief of the Sioux! Garde à toi — I will scalp thee with my tomahawk."

She rushed towards Margot, brandishing a paper-knife; but Margot's smile was a little embarrassed.

"It was very kind of Sir John," she said; "I must write and thank him at once."

The Indian chief laid her tomahawk on the table.

"Pour ça, non! It is I who will write to him — he sent the game to me."

"The hamper was addressed Mademoiselle Kostolitz," said Margot gently. "I must remind you, petite impertinente, that I have been in the world five years longer than you."

"Not at all," cried Valérie eagerly, but laughing too; "it is I who am really Mademoiselle Kostolitz — the great Mademoiselle Kostolitz, the celebrated violinist, about whom

all Europe will one day be raving! The game was sent to me, I tell you — you may help to eat it, but *I* will thank him for it."

Margot sat down, looking a little annoyed. Valérie once more seized the paper-knife and danced round her, crying out, "I will scalp thee — I will scalp thee, if thou art cross." Then, suddenly thrusting her face close to her sister's, she said pleadingly, "Do not look so serious, my patriarch — Bon-papa Margot."

What was to be done except to smile and give in?

"You will see what a nice little letter I will send him," cried Valérie; and triumphantly sitting down to the writing-table, she began the missive forthwith. A mischievous smile played about her lips, and now and then she broke into a laugh.

"Valérie, what are you writing?" cried Margot anxiously.

"I will read it to you when I have finished. Do not be afraid — Sir John will be very much pleased with my letter."

Presently she called out, "A la bonheur, it is done. Now you shall hear it." Wheeling round on her chair so as to face her sister, she began:

"Monsieur mon futur —"

"Valérie, it is not possible that you have written that!"

Margot had sprung up, making a hasty gesture as though she would snatch the paper from her sister's hands.

"No, no," cried Valérie, jumping up too, and holding the letter out of her reach. "Do not be afraid. I have put something much more appropriate than that — Monsieur le Chasseur."

Margot threw up her eyes and hands to heaven. "Worse and worse!" she cried.

"On the contrary, it is very clever of me to think of it. You understand that if this gentleman sends us game, he naturally wishes us to admire his prowess as a sportsman. That is what I mean to convey to him, delicately and without the appearance of flattery. Well, I continue: *My sister and I were both astonished and pleased to receive your handsome present of game.* — There, that is very *convenable*, is it not? — *But, my dear Sir* — "

"One does not say *My dear Sir*, in English, among friends or acquaintances," put in Margot.

"Never mind; he will understand that I

think in French. But now do let me read without interruptions: *my dear Sir, you must have made to yourself a curious idea of our appetites. How do you suppose we are going to come to the end of all you have sent us? If you had seen the mountain of game in our hall this morning, with only two such very little people to eat it, you would have laughed, as I did. But we do not, I assure you, complain of your excessive generosity — on the contrary, we mean to regale ourselves well. We shall have banquets of pheasants — we shall feast on hares. I have a plan of my own about those hares: after we have roasted them, and grilled them, and made* fricassées *of them, and soup of them, we shall make the remainder into little pies. If you knew how I adore* pâté de lièvre! *I shall hardly have patience to go through the first stages — roasting, grilling, &c. I am also looking forward to the day when we shall all make little pies; that is to say, our* chef *will make them, Margot will superintend, and I will advise.* — You see, I speak of our *chef* — to make him believe que nous menons grand train ici. He will not know that Jane is not only *chef*, but maître d'hôtel, laquais, femme de chambre."

"Valérie, is it possible to be so childish?" cried Margot, with real anger. "Sir John Croft knows very well that we are poor — indeed, it is probably for that," she added bitterly, "that he has sent us this hamper. He thinks that we have not enough to eat."

"But what takes you?" cried Valérie, in astonishment; "there you are, as red as a little bantam cock! I assure you, Sir John would never permit himself such impertinent ideas. He sends us this game as a politesse, une amabilité — a little souvenir, enfin. Tiens, let me finish my letter."

"No," cried Margot, almost passionately; "it is impossible that such a letter could go — I will not allow you to send it."

"And why not, if you please?" inquired Valérie, becoming red in her turn. "It is a very pretty letter, very nicely written — Sir John will like it very much."

"Sir John would probably laugh at it with all his heart," cried Margot; then, suddenly changing her tone, "No, no, my dear little sister, I cannot let you send that letter. Do you not see, it is not, to begin with, such a letter as a young girl should write to a gentle-

man with whom she is only slightly acquainted? Then, the tone is not becoming — no, really it is not, Valérie. We must not forget our position, and Sir John's."

"Ta, ta, ta," said Valérie, "je me moque bien of Sir John's position. Has he more than sixteen quarterings par hasard? And our mother, then?"

"The fact remains, my dear child, that he is a personage, and we are very insignificant. But even independently of this fact, your letter would never do. It is too familiar, too effusive, too naïve, enfin. Let me write a little note, Valérie — just a few lines to say we have received the hamper, and to thank him. I assure you, it is all that is needed."

Valérie moved away from the writing-table. "You are very disagreeable; I detest you," she observed briefly. Then she went out of the room, closing the door with a bang. Margot had soon written her note; but it struck her, on reading it over, that it was stiff and ungracious. She tore up the sheet and wrote it over again. Presently Valérie came into the room, and stood beside her sister's chair. Margot glanced round. Valérie was smiling,

and replacing the pheasant-feathers in her hair. Margot, delighted to see her good-humour restored, went on with her letter tranquilly.

"Is it finished?" inquired Valérie by-and-by, in deep and tragic tones.

"Yes, at last," said Margot, looking up. "O Valérie, what are you doing?"

Valérie had wrapped herself in a table-cloth, draping it over her shoulder after the manner of an Indian's blanket; and now, paper-knife in hand, struck a valiant attitude. When Margot looked at her, she uttered an extraordinary whoop and began to caper about the room. "It is a war-dance!" she exclaimed, presently halting. "Plume d'Aigle rejoices because he has conquered the white chief. Yes, my dear, I have no doubt your letter is extremely *convenable* and beautifully written, and you may also post it, if you have a fancy to do so; but my letter has already gone."

"Gone!" cried Margot in consternation.

"Yes," cried Valérie, resuming her dance of triumph; "I put it in the post myself."

Margot turned white with vexation. She had a temper of her own, though she never showed it to her beloved, if wayward charge;



therefore she did not now trust herself to speak. Tearing up her own note into little bits, she threw them into the waste-paper basket, and, crossing the room, sat down at the piano.

Valérie followed her; but, without appearing to notice her, Margot turned over the music on the piano, and presently, selecting a difficult and rather uninteresting study, began to play.

"Are you very angry?" inquired Valérie presently.

"Is it possible that I can be pleased?" answered Margot, without turning her head.

Valérie sighed; then, apparently struck by an idea, rushed to the writing-table, whence she presently returned with a penhandle sticking out of her mouth and another in her hand, which she gravely offered to Margot.

"Plume d'Aigle offers the great white chief the pipe of peace," she cried. "Do smoke the pipe of peace!"

"Ah ça, tu m'ennuies à la fin," said Margot, jumping up impatiently. "You have played this game long enough — moreover, I am not in the humour to enjoy it."

Valérie slowly took the feathers out of her hair and restored the penholders and table-cloth

to their proper places; then she sat down in a corner of the room. Margot resumed her playing, but she made mistakes and was abstracted. By-and-by she went across to Valérie and took her in her arms. "I cannot be angry with you," she said.

Valérie clung to her, her eyes full of tears.

"No, you must not be angry with your poor little Valérie," she said piteously. "I feel as though the ground were crumbling beneath my feet when you are angry! Ah, you must always love your child, even when she is naughty."

"She is sometimes very naughty, though," said Margot tenderly.

"And you would not let me pretend I was an Indian," lamented Valérie. "You would not laugh; you would not even smile! But now I must just do one thing more — only one thing more — and then I will never be an Indian again."

Disengaging herself from her sister's arms, she ran over to the fireplace and with great ceremony and a very solemn face thrust the shovel under the hearthrug.

"Child, what are you doing?" cried Margot.

"I am burying the hatchet," cried Valérie.

"Now the Indian chief and his great white brother will never quarrel again."

No further allusion was therefore made to Valérie's letter until a fortnight or so later, when another hamper arrived from Sir John. This time it was quite a small one, and, when opened, was found to contain snipe, woodcock, and golden plover. It was accompanied by a little note saying that Sir John Croft hoped Mademoiselle Kostolitz and her sister would find that he had duly considered the smallness of their appetites.

Valérie clapped her hands and jumped about the room. "Tu vois, tu vois," she cried, "I did well to write that letter! He was not at all angry, but very much amused."

"I never doubted that he would be amused," said Margot.

About the middle of November yet another hamper came; this time it contained flowers, every kind of rare hothouse bloom seeming to be there represented.

Valérie's delight knew no bounds; she filled every vase and glass that she possessed, laughing and singing the while.

"The room is like a fairy bower," she cried.

"I wish somebody nice would call; I wish Sir John would come himself. Is it not strange, Margot, that he does not come to town to begin his singing lessons? He said he would come soon, did he not?"

"He said so," said Margot, "but he is probably amusing himself very much somewhere else."

"Well, I hope he will come soon," repeated Valérie.



VI

ACCELERANDO

SHORTLY before Christmas Sir John did come. Valérie had frequently expressed her hope that he would not observe the deficiencies of the oilcloth in the hall, and Margot had answered that it was not likely a young man would notice such things. Nevertheless Sir John did notice it, and he also remarked the odd medley in the little room upstairs, and observed with an inward smile, that was both tender and compassionate, Valérie's attempts at decoration. By this time the Madras muslin had got very limp and dusty, and the little bows of ribbon had begun to fade, and some of the plates had slipped from their wire fastenings. Sir John took note of it all; and, curiously enough, he found it not so much amusing as pathetic.

When the sisters came in, and saw him standing with his back to the fire, looking so

big and handsome and prosperous — so smart, moreover, in his London clothes — they were both seized with shyness. But he was quite at his ease. After the first greetings he prepared to sit down on the chair nearest him; but Valérie sprang forward with a little shriek.

"Not that one," she cried; "we only keep that chair for ornament, one of the legs is not very solid."

Looking up and meeting his laughing eyes, she laughed too; even Margot joined in, and the ice was at once broken. Indeed, it was impossible for anyone to remain on stiff terms with Sir John.

"John is so cosy," his aunt had once said. It seemed an odd term to apply to this strapping young fellow, and yet it suited him. There was something so friendly and engaging in his manner, his smile was so winning and gentle, he managed in such an inexplicable way to convey to people the impression that he was deeply interested in themselves and their concerns, that he very soon was admitted to their confidence.

Perhaps the secret of this fascination lay in the fact that the interest which he expressed



was genuine. Sir John Croft had doubtless many faults; he was indolent, somewhat careless, and perhaps a little too well pleased with himself and with life in general to study its serious side, but he had the kindest heart in the world. He was full of sincere sympathy for people in trouble, and would go out of his way to serve them; he did not mind sacrificing his own pleasure — and no man living was more keenly alive to wholesome pleasure than Sir John — in the interests of a friend. He was kind, generous, good-natured to all the world, and in some instances ludicrously tender-hearted. It was narrated of him that once, when boating at Cambridge, he had insisted on putting ashore that he might pursue and reprimand a woman whom he had seen beating a child. His companions had jeered and anathematised him, and the woman had indignantly protested that the child was her own.

"Then you don't deserve to have a child," cried the young Mentor with flashing eyes, proceeding to deliver a severe dissertation on the duties and responsibilities entailed by motherhood. Then he had gone back to his boat and his laughing companions, leaving the

woman aghast, and impressed in spite of herself. She had certainly never expected to be treated to a lecture on maternity by a young athlete in flannels.

Now as Croft, being at length provided with a trustworthy chair, chatted pleasantly with the two musicians, he unconsciously drew them out. He did not mean to be curious; they did not mean to be indiscreet, but somehow he managed during the course of an hour's conversation to find out a great deal about them. It was quite natural, for instance, that he should admire their piano. Valérie immediately told him that it had belonged to their mother.

"It was poor mamma's *dot;* that, and the pictures, and the writing-table, were part of the furniture of her room when she was a young girl. Her family sent them after her when she and my father left Paris."

"Your mother was French, was she not?" asked Croft, with interest.

"Yes, she was a Demoiselle de Renaissan. Poor mother! I can just remember her — she died when I was eight years old. She was so pretty — so pretty, but so pale; and her little hands were so white and thin. She used to sit



by the fire, sewing, sewing — and then one day she rolled up her work — it was a coat of papa's, I think, which she was mending — and folded her hands — so — you remember, Margot?"

Margot did not answer, and Croft saw that her eyes were full of tears.

"By-and-by," continued Valérie, "she got up and went out of the room, leaning upon the chairs and tables as she passed. Is it not strange? I remember that as if it were yesterday, though I cannot recall anything about the illness which followed."

"Your sister is very like the picture," said Croft, looking towards the portrait. Thence, indeed, the same soft eyes looked pathetically forth; and the perfect oval of the small face, the graceful lines of the slight figure, were exactly reproduced.

"Oh yes," cried Valérie, with a sudden change of tone, "Margot is just like mamma. She is thoroughly French; she loves le décorum; she likes everything to be *convenable* — do you not, Margot? And she has such little dainty ways! She is an aristocrat, is my sister, even when she dusts the room or makes a pudding. I call her Mademoiselle la Marquise."



When she dusts the room or makes a pudding! Sir John did not like to think of Margot doing these things. He looked quickly at Valérie to see if she was serious.

"And do you, too, dust rooms and make puddings?" he inquired, in a tone which he could not prevent from sounding shocked and startled.

"Oh no; she will not let me do any work, though I should like it. I am born to it — I am a Bohemian, like papa."

"Valérie, you are talking great nonsense," said Margot, rather severely. "Sir John will not be interested in these détails de ménage. It goes without saying that, as we only have one servant, she cannot possibly do all the work in the house, and it is equally needless to explain that your hands must not be coarsened by any rough labour, lest they might lose their delicate touch."

Croft glanced at the hands folded on Margot's lap; they, too, were delicate, slender, and refined — the hands of an aristocrat. He thought compassionately of those other hands about which Valérie had spoken, the little white hands so slight and transparent, which had



gone on sewing, sewing, until at last they had been obliged to fold themselves and be at rest.

He would like to know more about this delicate French mother, the mother who had been a Demoiselle de Renaissan. De Renaissan! The name was curiously familiar to him — where had he heard it before? Suddenly he recalled Valérie's laughing words — "Mademoiselle la Marquise" — and memory returned to him.

"I knew a man called De Renaissan once," he cried; "he was Attaché to the French Legation at Vienna — a Marquis de Renaissan — I think his Christian name was Gilbert. I wonder if he is any relation of yours?"

"I think he must be a cousin," said Margot, coldly. "Gilbert? Yes, it was my grandfather's name. He is probably a cousin."

"Our mother's relations do not acknowledge *us*," put in Valérie quickly; "they would not acknowledge her after her marriage. You must know, our dear little mother was not very wise. She made what her people thought one great folly — she ran away with my father, who was her music-master. Monsieur le Marquis de Renaissan, and all his high and noble family,

could naturally never forgive the mésalliance."

"Perhaps, Valérie," said Margot, a little impatiently, "now that monsieur is thoroughly au courant of all our family history, you will kindly change the subject."

"I will change the subject," said Valérie accommodatingly. "We will talk about Sir John. Sir John, what have you been doing with yourself all these weeks?"

"I have been shooting," said Sir John; "and hunting," he added quickly. He did not want to be thanked again for the game.

"Shooting and hunting," repeated Valérie; "I am afraid you have no sérieux."

"On the contrary," said Croft, "I have come to town full of doughty resolutions. I am burning, longing, to know how to sing! I am impatient to begin my lessons. When may I begin?"

"When may he begin, Margot?" echoed Valérie, with a quaint, almost involuntary imitation of his tone. "You see, monsieur is so impatient! While he was killing his birds and jumping his hedges and ditches, he was in reality longing and burning to begin his — *solfèges.*"

Sir John laughed very frankly and merrily.

"There is a frost now," he said; "it is really a good time to begin — one will have fewer di tractions."

"Do you really want to learn?" inquired Margot, a little drily. "You seem to have lived very comfortably hitherto, without knowing how to sing. Why should you begin now?"

"Because it is against my principles, mademoiselle, to bury my talent in a napkin. I want to learn singing. I want to have three lessons a week — can you spare me three hours a week?"

"Certainly," said Margot. "In the morning or in the afternoon?"

"The morning, please," said Sir John.

"Ah yes, it will be better in the morning. Then your afternoons will be free."

"Mademoiselle," said Sir John, with an air of mock solemnity, "you persist in misconstruing my motives. I said the morning because I thought it sounded more business-like; I want you to realise how energetic I am. But, of course, I do not wish to interfere with your other pupils. By the way, have you got any new pupils since you were at Brackenhurst?"

The tone was so kindly, the eyes which he bent on Margot so full of sincere goodwill, that even she could not set down the question as impertinent.

"Yes, we have three or four," she answered, with a smile. "Our connection does not increase rapidly; but still it is increasing."

"Three or four!" repeated Sir John, in a tone of vexation; adding, half to himself, "What is my aunt thinking of? I believe she does nothing — morning, noon, or night — but potter about that blessed Institution. Tell me the names," he pursued aloud.

Margot did so, still without resenting his pertinacity.

"Not one I know!" he exclaimed in a tone of annoyance.

"They are the most uninteresting children you ever beheld," explained Valérie. "How my sister has patience with them I do not know. Stupid little things, with red dumpy fingers and their hair in pig-tails. Now, to make matters worse, they all have colds in their heads."

"I am glad to hear that Mademoiselle Margot is patient," said Sir John. "She is so serious,

so business-like, that sometimes I am quite afraid of her. If she were to get out of patience with me, I should lose my head altogether."

Margot laughed.

"Oh, I shall be very patient — I will not scold you."

Sir John rose to go.

"Then it is arranged. Shall we have our first lesson to-morrow?"

"Certainly, to-morrow, if you like," said Margot.

As he put out his hand to say good-bye, she added, colouring:

"Since you think me so business-like, I must not forget to tell you that my terms are half a guinea a lesson."

"Half a guinea?" said Sir John, looking a little blank.

"Is it too much?" asked Margot hastily.

"Oh no," reddening in his turn; "I — I thought — I quite expected it would be a guinea. I think it ought to be a guinea. I used to pay a guinea before, long ago, when I took lessons."

In his heart he was ruefully reckoning the number of hours he would have to pass in

studying solfeggios before this little couple could materially benefit. Margot, divining something of his thought, instantly stiffened.

"Probably your teacher was already firmly established, and could in consequence make what terms he chose. I have got my own way to make, and my charge is the same for all my pupils."

"I think it ought to be a guinea," persisted Sir John.

"I am very sorry," said Margot, sharply, "I can quite understand that it is not the style of thing to which you are accustomed; but if you choose to employ a struggling artist, you must take the consequences."

She coloured hotly as she spoke. Her suspicions, which had been for a time allayed by the charm of Sir John's voice and manner, now rose up afresh, and she felt, moreover, irritated and resentful. Sir John was taking these lessons solely on their account; he was scarcely at the pains to disguise the fact. His motive, perhaps, was a good-natured compassion for their poverty — that was in itself humiliating; but might there not be something else in the background, something which would make his

patronage yet more intolerable? For a moment Margot was tempted to refuse this patronage altogether — to put an end, by a few hasty peremptory words, to Sir John's projected musical studies. But even as she opened her lips to speak, the young man turned towards her, extending his hand in farewell; and on meeting the frank honest gaze of his blue eyes she felt ashamed and remorseful.

Valérie meanwhile was apparently in the highest spirits, and chatted gayly about their visitor after he had left.

"Was it not strange that he should have known our cousin?" she cried, all at once.

"We told him too much about ourselves," said Margot in a tone of vexation. "It would have been better to have kept our family history to ourselves."

"All the same, you were not sorry when I told him about our mother being noble," returned Valérie. "Do not deny it; I saw by your eyes that you were pleased."

Margot blushed, ashamed of the little human weakness.

"At least," she said, "he will now have no doubt about our style of living! I am afraid,

Valérie, he will not now believe that we have a chef and a maître d'hôtel, since you told him that I dust the rooms myself."

"Au fait," said Valérie, "I had not thought of it. But, my dear, once he has seen the oilcloth in the hall, it is impossible for him to have any more illusions about us. It will be amusing, his singing lesson to-morrow. I wager that he has a great big voice which he does not know what to do with."

"À propos," said Margot decidedly, "you know you must not be in the room, Valérie. His lesson will not be amusing at all. If he wishes me to teach him, he must work, and work hard, without any interruptions. You must remain downstairs, or in your own room, my dear child, for many reasons."

Valérie was disposed to rebel, but Margot was peremptory. "I do not in any case much care about his coming," she said; "and if you will not take my advice in this matter, I will write and tell him that I cannot receive him as a pupil."

She looked so determined that her sister knew she meant what she said, and gave in with a pouting protest.



"All the same," she said, recovering her good-humour after a moment or two, "I think you ought to have me to act duenna. It is not *convenable* for you to receive a young man all alone."

"A duenna for me?" said Margot, with rather a sad little laugh. "Il s'agit bien de cela."

She was two-and-twenty, but she felt herself to be old, old, and exceedingly wise; she knew how to take care of herself, but Valérie must be kept out of harm's way.

Next morning, punctually at eleven, Sir John arrived. He proved to have a good baritone voice, which he did not in the least know how to manage.

"We shall have to begin at the beginning, I see," said Margot.

Sir John assented a little ruefully; he was feeling somewhat nervous, and was really, to a certain extent, in awe of this business-like little woman. Moreover, to tell the truth, the actual study bored him; he was sincerely anxious to help his *protégées*, and, moreover, found their society pleasant and interesting, but he did not enjoy the singing of his *solfèges*.

Margot did not intend that he should; but she was quite determined that, though he took these lessons less for his own benefit than for hers and her sister's, he should have his full money's worth. So, for nearly an hour, Croft laboured wearily, making the same rather stupid mistakes over and over again, from sheer nervousness, and always expecting his determined little teacher to make some sarcastic comment. But Margot was very patient. She took infinite pains to make her meaning clear to him, and gently recalled his attention when, from time to time, it wandered. It was dreary work, but on the whole she was less bored than he. By-and-by Sir John, happening to raise his eyes, perceived that the little blue *portières* already alluded to were slowly creeping one towards the other, the cords being evidently drawn by some one keeping out of sight in the adjoining room. This spectacle did not tend to increase his equanimity, and, when Margot presently proposed that he should try over a very simple song which she thought might suit his voice, he suggested humbly that he had had enough for one day. Margot looked at her watch: "You have still a quarter of an hour,"

she said. "You will have time to try this over — you will not find it difficult."

She began the accompaniment, and poor Sir John obediently attempted the song, but he made a sad muddle of it, being much perplexed in his mind as to whether Valérie might not be listening behind those curtains.

"I think you can do better than that," said Margot, for once almost losing patience. "Try again, and keep time better."

Croft began, but after a moment or two broke off with a laugh. Margot followed the direction of his eyes: there, from between the curtains, a little dimpled hand was extended, which was marking the measure of the music with outstretched forefinger.

Margot rose from the piano with an indignant "Valérie!"

Her sister, drawing the *portières* apart, revealed her laughing face and slight figure. "I have not broken my word," she said. "I said I would not come into the room, and I have not — have I? But confess, Sir John, it goes much better when I beat time."

"Very much better," said Croft.

"Margot is so severe; she says I would interrupt if I came in."

"You can come in now," said Margot, "the lesson is over." She moved away from the piano, and stood facing Sir John, evidently expecting him to take his departure; but he had no such intention. Throwing himself into an armchair, he heaved a sigh of relief.

"I have ridden a runaway horse," he said; "I have interviewed a Cabinet Minister; I have once or twice been in imminent danger of falling over a precipice; but, upon my word, I do not think I have ever been through such an ordeal as this!"

Margot sat down, laughing. "I thought you did not quite realise what you were undertaking," she remarked; "but there is no royal road to learning, you know. You must begin at the beginning, if you want to get on."

"Oh, I don't mind beginning at the beginning," said Croft. "I only feel that I am a fool, and that you think me one."

"You wrong both yourself and me," said Margot, looking up with a charming smile. "I fancy you will not want to take any more lessons."

"You must have a very poor opinion of my force of will," returned Croft. "On the con-



trary, I mean to go on to the bitter end — even until I have mastered the intricacies of 'Comme à vingt ans.' Do you think I shall have to learn 'Comme à vingt ans'? I will submit, but it will be a struggle."

"Yes, yes; you must learn it," cried Valérie, clapping her hands. "Margot will spare you nothing, not even the little falsetto at the end."

Sir John raised his eyebrows and groaned. "Well, I am prepared for everything. Do you not think my beautiful dispositions deserve to be rewarded? Will you not play to me, Mademoiselle Valérie?"

Mademoiselle Valérie did play; and Sir John listened and applauded. It was not until Jane rang the little cracked bell which announced the sisters' modest one o'clock dinner that he took his departure.

The lessons continued, Croft proving himself a docile and intelligent pupil; but at their conclusion he invariably considered himself entitled to an hour or so's repose in one of the shabby armchairs, and to the further relaxation of conversation with the sisters. It would have been quite impossible to keep Valérie out



of the way, and Margot did not attempt it. Gradually, moreover, Valérie got into the habit of coming into the room during the lessons; and as she did not interrupt, and her presence had no visible effect on the pupil, Margot ceased to object. Nevertheless she felt a certain anxiety on the subject, and the rigid ideas of decorum which she had inherited from her mother were shocked by what she considered these slight lapses from propriety.

The curious friendship which had grown up between the three grew and strengthened, however, from day to day; even Margot felt an increasing regard for her pupil, and from time to time she actually found herself confiding in him, consulting him when any little difficulty occurred. It was impossible not to trust one who showed himself so full of friendly interest — whose attitude, indeed, towards them was such as might have been expected from a very kind elder brother. Never by word or look was there any hint of a desire to flirt with either of the girls. Never did he attempt to overstep the limits which he had apparently marked out at first for himself. He was not passive in his endeavour to serve them, but made strenu-



ous efforts to secure for them more valuable patronage than his own. It was not, however, very much that a young man like him could do; people were not likely to select their daughters' music-mistress on his recommendation.

"I thought you knew nothing about music?" some one would say; or, again, "Mademoiselle Kostolitz? Who is Mademoiselle Kostolitz? I have never heard of her. Julia and Mary are taught by a pupil of Hallé. Yes, I know Hallé's playing was cold, but then his style was so finished. One can always tell a pupil of Hallé's, &c., &c."

Sir John did, nevertheless, manage to do the sisters Kostolitz one very good turn.

He persuaded a friend of his, a lady well known for her smart and successful parties, to give an At Home, at which Valérie and her violin were the chief attractions. This time the entertainment was completely successful. Valérie received an ovation which satisfied even her, and, moreover, made several valuable new acquaintances. This entertainment would, they hoped, lead to more of the same kind; she would get known, and would be

brought into contact with other musicians and with music-loving people. Meanwhile one or two pupils who might really be expected to do her credit had, as a further consequence, accrued to Margot.



VII

SCHERZANDO

TIME went on; Christmas came, bringing a fresh consignment of flowers from Sir John, and the New Year, on which day his étrennes took the form of bonbons. Valérie laughed, and munched, and thanked the donor with such pretty childish glee that he was more charmed with her than ever. Margot's gratitude was more soberly expressed, but she too was pleased.

One day, at the close of the lesson, when they all had been discussing music, Sir John chanced to mention a certain famous violinist who was on the morrow to give a farewell concert before leaving England. It happened that the sisters had never heard him, and they now expressed much regret and longing.

"We heard of this concert too late," said Margot; "we could not now get places, even if we were to try. They say people stand for hours, waiting for the doors to be opened."

"I would gladly stand for hours, days, to hear him!" cried Valérie, her little face changing, as it always did, when she spoke of anything touching her art.

"You would catch cold, if we tried to-morrow," said her sister. "You shall go another time, when Mr. —— comes back to England."

"We may be dead by then," returned Valérie, still in a tone of passionate regret. "Fancy, if we were to die without having heard the greatest violinist in the world! They say he is the greatest, do they not?"

"Upon my soul," said Sir John abruptly, "I think you have more charm."

"Oh, oh," cried Valérie, "what an exaggerated compliment!" But she was much delighted all the same.

About half-past two next day a hansom dashed up to the door of No. 28 Pitt Street, and Sir John Croft pushed past the startled Jane, who had in haste and astonishment answered his violent ring, and rushed upstairs.

"Where is your sister?" he cried, finding only Valérie in the drawing-room. "Look here, I have managed to get two tickets for you — for the recital to-day. They were sent back at the



last moment. But you must make haste; it begins at three. You had better take my hansom and start off at once. Where is your sister?"

"Oh malheur!" cried Valérie, turning quite white, while tears of disappointment leaped out on her cheeks, "Margot has gone to Wimbledon for the afternoon! One of her pupils has a cold, and could not come here for her lesson. Oh, this is too much! I would have given anything, *anything*, to have gone. It is just like my luck!"

She was actually sobbing. Sir John was deeply distressed. "Is there no one whom you could persuade to take you?" he asked.

Valérie shook her head. "No, no; we do not know anyone whom I could ask at such short notice; we have no acquaintances except our pupils and their relations. I think you are our only real friend. Oh! Sir John"—struck by a sudden thought—"could not you take me? Would it bore you very much?"

Her face, beaming with the sweetest, shyest smiles, and, moreover, alight with hope, was turned towards him; she had involuntarily extended her hands. Sir John coloured to the roots of his hair: would he not be the veriest

coxcomb to resist such pleading? Yet the poor little thing was so ignorant of the ways of the world, that it might be, on the other hand, unchivalrous to allow her thus to transgress the laws of convention.

"Nothing in the world would give me greater pleasure," he said, rather gravely, after a moment's pause; "but I fear your sister would not approve."

"Oh, as to that," cried Valérie joyously, "she will not know until we come back, and I do not mind her scoldings."

"But I do," said Sir John; "I should not like her to think I had taken advantage of her absence to persuade you to do a thing which she would not consider *convenable*."

"Pour ça," said Valérie, "it is I who persuade you, and you will be very unkind if you refuse. I care nothing for the *convenable*, *moi*. Bah, you will not eat me! If you do not come with me, I will go alone; and I have never, never, *never* gone out alone in my life. I shall assuredly lose myself, or perhaps somebody will carry me off. Nevertheless, I *will* hear ——. Ah, it is maddening to think how much precious time we are wasting — we must miss the first



piece, as it is. Now I am going. Will you come with me, or will you not?"

Of the two evils it was certainly better to consent to escort the harum-scarum little creature than to suffer her to go alone. His promise once given, Valérie flew upstairs; and presently returned, having donned cape and hat—a very pretty little hat with coquettish rose-coloured plumes.

Sir John wished in his heart it were not quite so noticeable, and that Valérie did not look so radiant and so lovely.

Going downstairs, he proposed calling a four-wheeler, but Valérie scouted the idea, which would, she said, involve the waste of valuable time, and skipped into the hansom before he could make any further protest. Once they had fairly started and were flying along wood-pavements and whisking round corners, with a clear cold air blowing in their faces, Sir John's scruples vanished. Looking down at the sparkling little face beside him, and listening to Valérie's chatter, he gave himself up to enjoyment.

Seeing her so entirely happy, why should he care for Mrs. Grundy? Could it hurt Valérie any more to sit by his side in a hansom, or in a

concert-hall, than in the little drawing-room at Pitt Street? He knew himself to be incapable of taking advantage of her confidence by the utterance of a word which her sister might not hear. Meanwhile it was amusing and exhilarating to watch the little creature's pleasure; and when, later on, they were established in their places in St. James's Hall, he was more than amused and interested. He felt it to be a privilege to watch her absorbed face, marking how the play of the mobile features varied with the changes in the music. At times the whole of her artist soul seemed to shine in her eyes; he could even see her hands working, the fingers curving themselves involuntarily, as though they too itched to handle bow and strings. Then her comments during the intervals — how lucid they were, how clever, how full of insight and appreciation, how free from any tinge of envy or jealousy!

Sir John looked and listened with ever-increasing respect and admiration; there seemed to be two people in Valérie, and just then she was all the artist, the very great artist, who might possibly some day take precedence of the famous brother to whom she was now listening.



But when they were once more seated, side by side, in the hansom, the little Valérie of Pitt Street reappeared.

"What a day we have had — ah, what a day! It has been glorious. I only wish it were not now over. I am glad the streets are so crowded and we must go so slowly — there is a block — do you not call it so? I am glad; now we can look about at all these lovely shops. Ah! what a cake-shop! Do you see that cake-shop, with all the beautiful cakes and bonbons in the window? Do they not look inviting?"

Sir John looked at the shop in question — a certain fashionable pastrycook's in Oxford Street.

"I believe you can get tea and chocolate in there," he said. "Would you like to come in and have a cup of chocolate, and some of the little cakes you are so fond of?"

"Cakes with pink sugar on the top," cried Valérie, ecstatically. "Do you know those little cakes? They are delicious. Oh, thank you; I should like it of all things."

Croft thrust his cane through the aperture at the top of the hansom, and desired the driver to stop. Valérie alighted gaily, and almost ran

before him into the shop. She was at once supplied with a cup of chocolate, but it took some little time to satisfy her with the precise description of pink sugared cake on which she had set her heart. Sir John laughed as he watched her wandering up and down the counter, scrutinising and rejecting; at last, with a cry of joy, she pounced upon the object of her search.

"These are they — these are they! Yes, you may give me three or four."

Holding aloft the plate which bore her treasures, she made her way back in triumph to Croft's side. Leaning on his elbow, he looked on, laughing, while she disposed of her cakes, leaving the sugar to the last in every case, and then nibbling it very slowly. Meanwhile she and Sir John chatted together in Hungarian; Valérie criticising, with great freedom and equal drollery, the different people who came in.

"There is a very tall lady," she cried, as she regretfully swallowed the last minute mouthful of crumbling pink sugar; "and, not content with being tall, she carries her head so high — so high. And she has got such plumes in her hat, it is as though she wanted to sweep the



ceiling. And her nose — oh, she is carrying her nose the highest of all! Ah, do you know, it is as if I had seen her face before."

Sir John looked round. "It is Lady Rosamond Gorst," he said. "What a nuisance!"

Lady Rosamond walked straight up to the counter, followed by another lady, with whom she conversed over her shoulder; they ordered chocolate and selected eatables. Sir John meanwhile had been impatiently watching Valérie whilst she buttoned her gloves; he was particularly anxious that they should make their escape before Lady Rosamond recognised them. Her ladyship was, however, perfectly aware of their presence; and when they arose to go, she turned and confronted them.

"How do you do, Sir John?" she said. "I hope you enjoyed the concert. I saw you there. —— was in form, was n't he? But I always think recitals are deadly things. How do you do?" coldly to Valérie, on whom she further bestowed a little impertinent nod. Valérie responded by just such another salutation.

"I do not think you know my friend Mrs. Miller," pursued Rosamond, again turning to

Croft. "Beatrice, let me introduce Sir John Croft."

Mrs. Miller, after the usual amenities, proceeded to speak of the concert, asking Sir John various questions as to his impressions and descanting at length on her own.

"Sir John's criticisms will be valuable," remarked Lady Rosamond. "I hear you are developing into quite a musical genius," she pursued, addressing him. "I am quite amused at your sudden passion for singing. No one was even aware till now that you possessed a voice."

"Oh yes, I have got a voice," returned Croft, tranquilly; "but I never have had time to cultivate it before. Now I can roar you as gently as any sucking-dove. Seriously, I am making great progress — am I not, mademoiselle?" turning pointedly to Valérie, whom the other ladies seemed disposed to ignore. "By-the-bye, Mrs. Miller, I don't think you know Mademoiselle Kostolitz."

Mrs. Miller acknowledged the introduction by the slightest possible movement of the eyebrows.

"Mademoiselle Kostolitz's sister is kind



enough to give me singing lessons," pursued Sir John; "and, though you may sneer, Lady Rosamond, I intend to do my teacher great credit. Some day you may be very glad to hear me."

In another moment or two he had managed to get Valérie and himself out of the shop, without any appearance of undue haste. He had done his best to carry off things easily, but he was in reality intensely annoyed at the encounter. Lady Rosamond was the last woman in the world whom, under the circumstances, he would have wished to meet. Even at Brackenhurst she had taken no pains to conceal her dislike of the sisters Kostolitz — a dislike grounded no doubt on the jealousy of Sir John's attentions. But to-day she had been so insolent in her manner to Valérie, her tone, even to Sir John, had been so full of covert sneers, her glances so significant, that he felt not only vexed, but seriously perturbed. Lady Rosamond had a sharp and malicious tongue, and, unfortunately, a wide circle of acquaintances, and these acquaintances formed part of the same set to which Sir John had made such strenuous exertions to introduce Valérie and

Margot. There was no knowing what construction might not be placed on the innocent escapade of the afternoon, nor what harmful consequences to the poor little musicians might not result therefrom.

Sir John was very silent during their homeward drive, and even Valérie did not chatter so gaily as before, her remarks being chiefly confined to sarcastic comments on the demeanour of Lady Rosamond and her friend.

As they drew near Pitt Street Sir John experienced a further sinking of the heart; Margot was to be faced, and just now the thought of facing Margot was a litle formidable.

Directly the hansom drew up before the house the door opened and Margot's figure appeared outlined against the narrow gas-lit hall.

"C'est toi!" she cried. "Ah, how frightened I have been!"

"How could you be frightened?" said Valérie. "Did not Jane tell you I had gone to the concert with Sir John?"

Leaping down lightly, she ran up the steps, followed by Croft.

"I must explain," he was beginning; but,



looking at Margot's face, he saw that there was to be no explanation that day. After one glance, in which anger and disdain were mingled, she drew Valérie into the house and closed the door. Standing alone on the steps without, Sir John uttered a low rueful whistle, and slowly sought his hansom again.

Meanwhile Margot motioned to Valérie to go upstairs, and followed her in absolute silence. When they reached the drawing-room, she turned her sister round and looked at her sternly.

"Valérie," she said, "how is it possible that you could have done such a thing?"

"Eh, what a face!" cried Valérie; "you frighten me! It is all the fault of that stupid child with the cold in her head. If you had not had to go to Wimbledon, you would have gone with me, and there would have been no question of Sir John."

Margot's face changed. "It is true," she said, in a low voice. "I ought never to leave you; I never know what may happen when I am away. Yet, Valérie, you who know so well how anxious I am about you, how could you have taken such an advantage of my absence?

But, indeed, I do not blame you the most. It is Sir John Croft — he whom I trusted, whom I thought our friend."

"Margot, Margot, do not be so tragic! What an affair about nothing! Listen, and I will tell you all about it."

Thereupon Valérie, half laughing and half crying, proceeded, with many digressions, and talking very fast, to narrate the events of the day, — how Sir John had got the tickets, and how, as no other chaperon was forthcoming, she had asked him to escort her; how kind he had been; how he had taken her to a café and treated her to chocolate and cakes. At this point Margot sank into the nearest chair, her face even whiter than before.

"A café!" she repeated. "O Valérie, is it possible that you asked him to take you to a café?"

"No, no," returned Valérie triumphantly, "he proposed it himself! I assure you, Margot, he asked me if I would like to go. And do you know," she continued, with animation, "Lady Rosamond Gorst was there. You remember cette grande blonde who was at Brackenhurst, and whom we hated so — she



was there, with a friend, a Mrs. Miller — a lady with a very big hat and a very big mouth. And do you know, Margot, I think she was quite jealous when she saw me with Sir John. She said, "I saw you at the concert;" with such an air, if you could see! And she did not want to speak to me, though Sir John would not have me left out of the conversation. And she began to laugh at him in such a disagreeable way about his taking lessons, and having suddenly developed a passion for music."

"Bon, il ne manquait plus que cela!" said Margot, half to herself. She sat, leaning her head upon her hand, her face averted, so that her sister could not see it.

"You are not angry any more, are you?" inquired Valérie, stooping towards her and kissing her pretty soft hair. "You see, it was all quite simple."

"Oh yes, it was all very simple," returned Margot, in a strangled voice. "No, no; I am not angry with you any more. You will always be a child, my poor Valérie! You are my baby — my dear baby, and I must not leave you alone; that is all. Now go and get ready for supper."

Valérie ran upstairs, humming to herself a fragment of one of the airs she had heard that afternoon. She was delighted at having escaped so easily.

Margot meanwhile sat quite still, staring at the fire; her face was set, and there was a sparkle in her eyes other than the reflection of the glowing embers. All at once she sprang to her feet with a passionate gesture of wrath and scorn. "Lâche!" she cried.

VIII

MOLTO FURIOSO

WHEN Croft approached the Kostolitzes' house at his usual lesson-hour next morning, he was conscious at first of some little trepidation; nevertheless, he reflected that Margot had now had time to cool down. Valérie would most certainly have explained to her exactly how the expedition had come to pass; it was impossible, he thought, that she could really resent an act which had, after all, been so kindly meant. He had taken great trouble to procure those tickets, and had it not been for Margot's accidental absence she would have been as much overjoyed and as full of gratitude as her sister. His conscience, indeed, smote him somewhat when he remembered the halt at the pastrycook's; that injudicious proceeding was, however, due to a weakness which Margot, so well used to her sister's fascinating ways, could not judge too harshly.

But he felt that it had earned a reprimand, which he would take very humbly and penitently; then she would forgive him, and all would go well again.

This happy confidence deserted him, however, when he entered the drawing-room and approached Margot, whom he found waiting for him alone. She was standing by the chimney-piece, and though she turned round when he entered, she did not speak nor advance to meet him. He walked quickly across the room, and, as soon as he stood beside her, extended his hand. She did not take it. He looked into her face; it was very white, and the eyes were stern.

"You are angry, I see," he said, "but I refuse to quarrel with you — yes, even though you will not shake hands. Come, you may say all the hard things you like — I will confess that I have deserved them; but afterwards you must forgive me. I will bear my punishment, but we must be friends."

"Friends!" echoed Margot, bitterly; "you have never been our friend — I see it now. While we have been trusting you, you have been taking advantage of our foolish confi-



dence, our ignorance; you have been amusing yourself, playing with my poor little sister. Yesterday you showed yourself in your true colours. Heaven knows what harm Valérie's folly may not bring upon her; but yet I — I can hardly regret it — at least I now know what you are."

Poor Sir John's breath was completely taken away; he had told Margot to say what hard things she pleased, but he had never expected anything quite so hard as this. He turned rather pale, and leant back against the chimney-piece, too much astonished for a moment to speak. At last he exclaimed, with something like a laugh:

"I wonder what on earth you think I have done! Surely your sister has told you —"

"That she alone was to blame?" interrupted Margot, with angry sarcasm. "Oh yes, she told me, and I know exactly how much of her story to believe. If you had chosen to prevent her going, Sir John, you know you could have done so. And was it not you, you yourself, who proposed her going into that café?"

"It really was," answered Sir John, laughing outright. "I actually did commit that

enormity. And now, my dear Mademoiselle Margot" — assuming his usual kindly tone — "do not let us make mountains out of mole-hills. I am sorry, genuinely sorry, that I did take her there, because I see it annoys you so much; but let me assure you it really was not such a very dreadful thing to do. The whole expedition was not at all such a piece of impropriety as you think. Lots of girls, and very nice girls too, go to picture-galleries and exhibitions and concerts with young men nowadays, and nobody thinks anything of it. Yes, they even drive in hansoms and go into cake-shops!"

"Sir John," said Margot, and her eyes almost seemed to shoot forth flames, "I think it ungentlemanly and ungenerous of you to speak in that tone, remembering as you do our relative positions. You know very well that, though there might be nothing remarkable — so you say, at least; to me, I must own, it seems strange — in your taking about one of the young ladies whom you meet at your aunt's house or elsewhere in society, it is quite another matter when my sister is the person in question. Any of your friends who may have seen

you yesterday driving with her, or in the concert-room, or in that cake-shop, must have made very unfavourable comments. Indeed, Lady Rosamond Gorst did make comments and throw out hints — she will probably talk about the matter, and people will think — they will fancy — "

"What can they think and fancy?" interrupted Sir John, becoming as red as before he had been pale. "Twist the matter as you like, what can they say? The great artist, Mademoiselle Valérie Kostolitz, whose sister is good enough to give me lessons, is so kind as to come with me to a concert. Well, is there anything remarkable in that?"

"We will not discuss the matter any more," said Margot. "As to the lessons, I blame myself for having been so foolish as to consent to them. The whole question of those lessons has been a farce from beginning to end. You have made use of your pretended wish to study music as an excuse to obtain access to this house; you have not even disguised from me that the lessons themselves bore you, and evidently you jest about them with your friends. Everyone knows that it is only a pretext — that

you are simply amusing yourself with my little Valérie. Ah! my God, how could I be so blind! I allowed you to come, I encouraged you, I — I myself exposed the child to this! I, who always swore to protect her — to care for her!"

The last words were almost inarticulate; she paused, wringing her hands. Sir John had at first stood aghast, too much confounded at the torrent of fierce accusations, and, moreover, too profoundly hurt by them to attempt to interrupt her; but he now spoke, gently and firmly:

"Mademoiselle, you wrong me very much; but I hardly know how to make you believe that you do. I can only assure you most solemnly, on my word of honour as a man — you told me just now, you know, that I was not a gentleman; but you will admit, I hope, that I am a man — on my word of honour, then — on my oath, if you will — I am absolutely incapable of the motives you impute to me. I have never felt anything but the most genuine and admiring interest in your sister and yourself. As for those lessons — "

"The lessons will now cease," said Margot,



quickly. "After the escapade of yesterday, the mere fact of your coming to the house would excite further gossip. Oh, it is all very fine, Sir John, for you to talk of the sincerity of your friendship. If you really respected Valérie, if you were a true friend, you would not have exposed her to the mauvaises langues of your acquaintances, you would not have run the risk of causing a scandal about her. No, no; it is better to have an end of it all — you must not come here any more."

It was a moment or two before Croft replied: a variety of emotions were struggling in his mind, the predominant one being anger.

By-and-by, however, he took his elbow off the chimney-piece and made a step nearer Margot; there was a look in his face which she had never seen before.

"I refuse to accept that fiat of yours," he said, with quiet determination. "If my presence is unwelcome to you, I shall not force myself upon *you;* but I have done nothing to render myself unworthy of your sister's friendship, and as long as she is willing to receive me I shall continue to come."

"You will come, in spite of what I have

said?" asked Margot. She spoke quietly and firmly also; the two were measuring their strength.

"Yes, I will come from time to time to see Mademoiselle Valérie, and to inquire if I can in any way be of service to her. I refuse to be forbidden the house, as though I had done a dishonourable thing. I have always tried to be her friend — and yours; I will continue to be her friend as long as she will let me. If I know her, she will not cast me off."

"Sir John," said Margot, very gravely — she was not angry now, but intensely in earnest — "though I have been disappointed in you, I do not think you quite mean what you say. You do not realise what the consequences would be. It is quite true that Valérie would probably continue to see you, in spite of anything I could say to prevent it, but she shall not run any further risk; of that I am determined. If you insist on forcing yourself into this house, I will take her away. Think well before you drive me to this. Ah!" she cried, with gathering passion, "we have struggled so hard — I have had to work, to slave, to make even this poor little home for my sister — all my life I



have had so many difficulties to contend with — it has been such uphill work. And now — now, when we had just managed to escape from our grinding poverty — when we were just able to breathe, to hold up our heads — when there even seemed to be a glimmer of prosperity — "

She broke off. Sir John might have asked through whose intervention this state of things had been chiefly brought about, but he was too proud as well as too generous to reproach her.

"Nevertheless," pursued Margot, "cost what it may, I will prevent Valérie from being trifled with. If you continue your visits here, Sir John, I shall be forced to take her away. We must begin life again in a new place — we must start all over again."

Sir John interrupted her with a hasty gesture. "That is quite enough," he said. "I did not, as you say, realise that your views on the subject were so very strong. Do not be afraid — I shall never trouble either of you again."

Margot was surprised: she had not expected this sudden capitulation. She began to murmur something in a half-apologetic tone, but he cut her short.

"There is no more to be said, I think. Good-bye."

This time she held out her hand, hesitatingly, but he would not see it. With a bow he turned towards the door — in a moment he was gone.

He ran down the stairs hastily, his heart burning with wrath; he let himself out of the house, and began to walk away, still in hot indignation; but after a few paces he turned, half involuntarily, and looked back at the house. Poor, little, shabby house! After all, he had spent some very happy hours there. Was it his fancy, or did he really see a figure standing in the drawing-room window — a small white face pressed against the pane?



IX

CON TRISTEZZA

VALÉRIE had been careful to keep out of the way on this particular morning. Margot had not again alluded to Sir John, but her sister had very shrewd suspicions that the forthcoming interview would be a stormy one; she judged it therefore more prudent to wait in her own room until a treaty of peace should have been concluded. When the lesson was over, she meant to come down as usual. But though she strained her ears for the welcome sound of Sir John's *solfèges*, it was in vain; at last her curiosity got the better of her self-imposed discretion, and, running downstairs, she stood for a moment on the landing outside the drawing-room door. Absolute silence reigned in the room within; she could not even hear them talking. She opened the door very softly, and looked in: no one was in the room but Margot, who lay extended in an armchair

with her eyes closed. At the sound of the opening door she sat up quickly. Valérie, in astonishment, hastened to her side.

"Where is Sir John?" she cried, sharply.

"Sir John is gone," said Margot, turning, if possible, paler than before.

But Valérie was not at first disposed to take the matter seriously.

"You and he have quarrelled, I see," she said, laughing; "and, to punish you, he has gone away without taking his lesson. There, there, voilà une affaire! To-morrow he will come back and say he is sorry.'

"No, no," returned Margot, with a groan. "O Valérie, he will never come back!"

"Ah, pour ça, he will though, if I know him," cried Valérie, still laughing incredulously. "He may swear by all his gods that he will not, but he will! But what can you have said to make him so angry?"

"Oh, he is gone for ever. Do not deceive yourself," sighed Margot. "It was I who told him to go, and he has taken me at my word."

"You — told him to go!" ejaculated Valérie, crimsoning to the temples; then, flying at her



sister like a little fury, she seized her by the shoulders and actually shook her.

At another time Margot would have laughed, but now she only looked miserably into Valérie's face.

"Valérie, I did well," she pleaded, as soon as the other had relaxed her avenging grip. "Oh, my dear, you must see that I did well. Listen, my darling; you are so innocent that you do not understand —"

"I understand very well," interrupted Valérie fiercely. "I understand that you have sent away our best friend, our only friend, a man who has loaded us with benefits, a man who has every day, almost every hour, given us proof of his kind and delicate thought of us. Was it not, after all, out of pure kindness that he did take me to that wretched concert? Oh, how I wish I had never heard of it! It was I who made him take me; he did not want to, he said you would not like it. I begged and implored and insisted; I said I would go by myself, if he did not come with me; and at last he consented."

Margot looked at her, her eyes growing large with pain and a kind of terror. Had she,

after all, been tilting at windmills? Was this enemy whom she had so valiantly overthrown no enemy after all? Were these misdeeds of his, which during the long wakeful hours of the preceding night had assumed such gigantic proportions, not indeed so very heinous?

"And for this you have sent him away!" pursued Valérie, hot tears of wrath and grief springing to her eyes; "because he spoiled me a little, just as you have always spoiled me — because he did what I asked, and gave me a few cakes for which I did not ask, but which I hinted so very strongly that I liked, that he could not help seeing I wanted them. And for these bagatelles you have quarrelled with him — with our good friend! Margot!" with a little shriek of anger, "I cannot understand how you could have been so wicked, so ungrateful! Have you no heart? Do you not feel what you have done?"

"Valérie, Valérie," murmured Margot, speaking breathlessly in her tremulous haste, "it is you — it is you, who do not understand. It has been a mistake all along; it was an impossible friendship. It was — not right for us — two girls, living alone, to receive him as we



did — I ought never to have allowed those lessons. Surely, Valérie, even you could see that he simply made the lessons an excuse for coming to the house."

"Well, and if he did," returned Valérie, stoutly, "I think it was very kind of him to want to come. I am sure there is not much in this house to attract him."

Margot in desperation seized her sister's hands and held them firmly. "Do you not see, child, that *you* were the attraction? He came because you amused him — because he admired your pretty face, and was taken by your pretty ways. He is, after all, a man of the world. He knew very well what people would say about these visits of his — do you suppose, my little one, that Lady Rosamond was the first person who has made insulting remarks about his intimacy with us? No, indeed! What she said has opened my eyes; but you may depend that other people have made similar insinuations before. But what did he care? He has shown us plainly enough that he did not mind to what risks he exposed you, nor how much his conduct might injure your reputation, so long as he gratified his own selfish whim."

Margot spoke vehemently, almost violently; it might be she wanted to convince herself as well as her sister. Valérie snatched away her hands, and stood for a moment without speaking.

"Margot," she said at last, "if you can believe such things, I am sorry for you. I do not believe them; I do not doubt our friend. O Margot, is it possible that you can think of him — think of his nice, good face, and suspect him?"

The words conjured up a vision of Croft's familiar face, which never during the months that the sisters had known him had worn for them any other expression than that of kindness. Even to-day, under Margot's accusations, wounded though he had been, and angry, he had not suffered traces of these feelings to appear. Only in the eyes, those frank merry eyes, there had been reproach when he had said, "I have always tried to be her friend and yours."

O Heavens, if it were true! If his face had not belied him, if he had really been as faithful and sincere as his words implied, what a monster of ingratitude was she! But no, no,

she had not been mistaken; it was surely right and wise to act as she had done. It was the only course to pursue, the inevitable thing! Even Valérie's emotion helped to prove the greatness of the danger which she had averted.

"No need to tell me," she said, in a low voice, after a pause, "that he has a charming face — everything about him is charming. Little sister of my heart, do you not see that on this account I feared for you the more. It has often crossed my mind that, being thrown with him so much, you might grow to care for him and be made unhappy. Yesterday, when I saw you so pleased and excited, it gave me a kind of shock. I began to think — I began to fear."

Valérie stared at her blankly for a moment. "What do you mean?" she ejaculated.

"I mean, that you might grow — to love Sir John. And — oh, my Valérie, I know you! — if he did not love you in the same way, and it would be foolish to expect it, you would break your heart."

Valérie suddenly burst out laughing; then, marking Margot's white, astonished face, she paused, wiping her eyes.

"You really have the most extraordinary ideas," she said. "I do not know what fly has stung you lately, you are so exaltée — so full of lubies. I to love Sir John! — l'aimer d'amour, you mean? What are you thinking of? No, my dear; when I love, it shall be a great artist, a man whom I could feel to be my master, who would draw out of me the best that is in me, and yet whom I should always feel to be greater than myself. As for poor Sir John, I ask you, is there anything about him that one could love and revere like that? I loved him very much as a friend; yes, as a brother, as a *very nice* brother; and I loved him, too, because he was always so gay, so bright, so amusing — he brought sunshine into the house whenever he came. The days when he did not come were blank days. Now all the days will be blank — everything will be dreary and stupid, just as it was before we knew him! O Margot, Margot, you are very unkind and cruel" — here she began to cry again piteously — "cruel to me as well as to him. You have taken all the brightness out of my life; nothing is left but dulness, and monotony and hopelessness."

Margot's lip quivered, but she did not speak.

"Everything is hateful," went on Valérie, jerking out the phrases between fierce little sobs. "What is the use of studying, of practising, when it ends in nothing? I detest this house — this little, dreary, tiresome house, where everything is so ugly and so common — I hate London, with its fogs and its smoke, and its grimy streets — I hate your stupid little pupils — I hate everybody and everything except Sir John — and now you have driven Sir John away!"

Valérie had gone on in a crescendo of indignant complaint, expecting every moment to be interrupted by Margot. But Margot did not interrupt her; she did not attempt to justify herself; she listened very quietly until Valérie had reached the climax, and then she burst into a passion of tears.

Tears were rare with Margot, and Valérie had never seen her weep like this before — so despairingly, so bitterly. In a moment all her own grievances were forgotten and she flung herself at her sister's feet.

"My little Margot, my darling — no, no, you must not cry so! Ah, how wicked I have

been to torment you like this! O Margot, Margot, I beg of you, do not cry any more." Margot pressed her hands against her face and wept on, the tears trickling through her fingers.

"My beloved," went on Valérie, remorsefully, "it is I who am a monster, an ingrate, a horrid, horrid, wicked, perverse little wretch! Ah, how could I wound you so when you are so good to me? But you know I do not mean what I say; you know me, my Margot; you know I really love this little house, our home, and that you and I are always happy together."

Margot slightly shook her head and continued to sob convulsively.

"Then I will cry, too," said Valérie, sitting down on the floor and burying her face in her sister's lap. "I also will break my heart. Ah, Margot, my little mother, my beloved patriarch, you know that I adore you, and yet you will not believe that I am sorry."

Her acute distress roused Margot, and she made strenuous efforts to overcome the tumult of her grief; but she could not all at once succeed. Her heart was too sore; the desolation of her spirit too complete; her nerves, more-

over, too entirely unstrung, to permit of her regaining her self-control for a considerable time. But she wept less violently now, and flung her arms round Valérie, so that their touch conveyed to her the tender forgiveness which she could not speak.

Valérie sat hugging her sister's knees, and every now and then rubbing her own hot cheek against them with a caressing kitten-like movement, murmuring meanwhile broken phrases of endearment:

"Ah, my Bon-papa chéri, you have forgiven me, have you not? I adore you — I adore you! I will never grumble again — everything you do is right."

Poor Margot at this smiled faintly through her tears; but she felt in her sad heart that everything was wrong.

X

ALLEGRETTO MA NON TROPPO

THE days that ensued were dreary ones indeed. The remembrance of all that had passed after that fatal concert lay heavily upon the hearts of both sisters, but neither spoke of it. Valérie imposed this restraint on herself as a kind of atonement for her inconsiderate complaints; her attitude towards Margot was now full of remorseful tenderness; she practised assiduously, but Margot could not help seeing that she was restless and dispirited. Indeed, though Valérie missed Sir John, her regret was swallowed up in the deeper, more abiding discontent with her lot, from which the excitement consequent on his coming and going had for a time diverted her, but which now returned with renewed force. It was probable that even if the breach with their friend had not taken place, there would have been shortly a reaction in Valérie's feelings; she was too

true an artist to stifle for long her cravings for fame. Her vocation was imperative, overpowering; she had a message to deliver to the world, and she would know no rest until she obtained a hearing. But this hope seemed, at this stage of her career, to be further than ever from being realised. No more fashionable hostesses asked her to play at their 'At Homes,' and in some unaccountable way the introductions which the sisters had been promised came to naught. Once or twice it flashed across Margot that this might be owing to Lady Rosamond's ill-natured tongue; and, though she was naturally perturbed at the effect thus produced, she felt something that was almost satisfaction in surmising the cause. She had, then, not been altogether mistaken in her fears, not entirely unwise in her precautions; there had been grounds, after all, for her interference. But oh, how differently she might have set about it! Constantly, continually she was haunted by the memory of Sir John's words: "I have always tried to be her friend — and yours." "Her friend and yours!" And her own heart would cry out in reply: "He was — he was our friend, and I have driven him away."

His face was perpetually before her; she caught herself dwelling on its varying expressions, thinking over certain little tricks of manner, certain attitudes of his; she was actually pursued for days together by a passage in one of the songs which she had been teaching him — a passage in which he invariably made the same mistake. Over and over again that passage rang through her brain, the false note recurring with maddening persistency; she could see him bending over the page, his handsome brows knit in momentary vexation, then the apologetic smile which followed, the little backward toss of the head. He had one day torn the page of this particular song in his haste to turn it over. She remembered the episode well; she had been irritated by the repetition of the usual blunder, and he had declared she made him nervous. Ah, she would never be able to scold him any more. With brimming eyes she gazed at the torn page, but, suddenly recovering herself, continued the occupation in which she had been engaged when overtaken by this rush of emotion — that of sorting and putting away the music which Sir John Croft would never require again. So, at least, she presumed, for he

never sent for it. What was more strange, and what was, oddly enough, a source of immense consolation to Margot, was that he had never paid her for the lessons he had actually had. It was no doubt very foolish and unpractical for so business-like a person as Mademoiselle Kostolitz to take comfort from the knowledge that Sir John had not acquitted his just debts; but she indubitably did. She felt that after what had passed she could not have borne to take his money. She had at first looked forward with unspeakable dread to the postman's knock, which might bring her a letter from him — a letter containing a cheque. How would the letter run? Just a few words, perhaps: "With Sir John Croft's compliments." Or would he write a short and formal note: "Dear Mademoiselle Kostolitz, I enclose herewith a cheque for the amount for which I am in your debt. I think you will find it correct. Yours truly," &c.; and she would have to respond, "Dear Sir John Croft, many thanks for the cheque, which I received quite safely. I enclose herewith my account receipted. Yours truly," &c. — This would be their final parting! Oh, it would be unendurable, impossible! Luckily he seemed

to find the situation as difficult as she did.

It was certainly well for Margot that she could take comfort from anything, for she stood sorely in need of comfort during those long, weary, wintry days. Valérie was growing pale and thin; and though she bravely endeavoured to assume a semblance of cheerfulness in Margot's presence, the latter's sharp and loving eyes were not to be deceived. She too sometimes felt almost hopeless about Valérie's future, and the present was certainly dark. It could not be said that Valérie's hasty words rankled in her sister's mind, since they had been freely forgiven, and the remembrance of them served but to call forth a fresh rush of compassionate tenderness; but the remembrance was there, Valérie, in her irritation, had disclosed her real feelings with regard to the home which Margot had with so much difficulty provided for her; it was therefore useless to keep up any pretence about it. Margot had done her best, but it was a miserable little place; Valérie's tawdry adornments served but to make it seem more poverty-stricken. During the very cold weather some of Margot's pupils ceased to take lessons, so

that, in addition to her other troubles, she was now undergoing a continual gnawing anxiety about ways and means.

Meanwhile this stormy interview which had left such bitter regrets in Margot's mind had not been without a very strong effect upon Sir John. He had left town in a whirlwind of indignation, rebuking himself for his quixotic attempt to befriend people who resented his patronage, and resolving never again to meddle in anyone's affairs but his own. Margot's words stung and rankled in his memory. His face burned each time that he recalled them. He felt astonished, wounded, confounded. He had been so secure of his position as the sisters' friend and adviser, so sure of their trust, so confident of their affection, that Margot's sudden onslaught seemed to him an extraordinary thing; the little woman was not only unjust to him, but she actually despised him; there had been contempt, the most scathing contempt, in her words and look. He could not get over it, and, what was more unaccountable still, it had engendered in him a certain contempt for himself. Distorted though Margot's point of view had been, entirely as she had misjudged his motives, he nevertheless felt

that her view of his conduct was not altogether unjustifiable. He had been careless, he had been rash, he had idly let things take their course, without considering the consequences; and it was quite possible that the consequences might be serious enough for the Sisters Kostolitz.

"You are a man of the world; you ought to have known," Margot had said. Yes, she was right; he ought to have known.

Margot would never have made any mistake prejudicial to a friend; of that he was sure. She might be hard, no doubt she *was* hard, but she was true. She would not hesitate to sacrifice herself and her own pleasure when duty demanded it. Was there ever such devotion as hers towards her sister? Oh, no doubt, hers was a fine character; he acknowledged this to himself many times with a kind of resentful admiration. How firm she was — how strong! In what she believed to be her sister's interest she had been prepared to take even the most extreme measures. Sir John smiled rather bitterly to himself as he reflected that he was the ruthless enemy from whom Margot had threatened to fly.

Yes, she would have carried out her resolve, though it would have been a desperate step; all the old, heart-sickening struggles would have had to be gone through over again; all the old difficulties to be contended with. Sir John would soften at the remembrance of these past struggles and difficulties, and then, again, be angry with himself for softening; indeed, his prevailing attitude towards himself at this time was that of intense dissatisfaction. He felt exceedingly amazed at being so constantly pre-occupied with this affair. It was an episode which was finished, after all; why could he not have done with it? And he was equally annoyed because he had put himself in the way of such an episode, and again annoyed because he had not conducted himself all through the affair in a different manner. It was an obsession of which he could not rid himself. But a few short months ago one of Sir John's most noticeable and perhaps most lovable characteristics was his serene contentment with himself and with the world; but now he began to think the world a very topsy-turvy place, and he himself a poor sort of fellow. What had he done with his life, after all? Nothing, except to get as much fun out of

it as he could. He thought of Margot's eager, scornful comments long ago at Brackenhurst, when he had confessed his contentment with an idle life.

"What a miserable view of existence! — you should be ashamed."

Ah, there he was, working round to Margot again. What a different existence hers had been! *She* had fought her fight with the world single-handed, conquering countless obstacles, never suffering herself to be daunted; and all so quietly, so uncomplainingly, always anxious to push her sister to the front, being herself content with a second place.

"She has twice as much character as Valérie," Croft would say to himself.

Valérie had never been rude or unkind to him, and he thought of her sometimes with an indulgent smile; but it was Margot's face that haunted him.

Towards the middle of Feburary, when an untimely frost had put a temporary end to his hunting, and in the nature of things it was no longer possible to slaughter pheasants, Sir John, finding himself deprived of the natural solaces of man, thought he would indulge himself in

a little trip to Paris. He stayed a few days in town on his way, and one afternoon, as he was walking down Charing Cross after a visit to his banker, his attention was suddenly caught by one face out of the many that passed him in that crowded thoroughfare. A small face, pinched and pale, with large frightened eyes looking at him with an intensity which had probably attracted his own. He had difficulty in realising that this timid, appealing face, this shrinking, hesitating figure belonged to Margot. She had always seemed so strong, so self-possessed, that he could scarcely recognise her identity. But it was Margot, nevertheless, and her face was upturned to his in piteous, unconscious appeal, and her eyes said imploringly, "Do not pass me by!"

In an instant the cloud which had rested on his heart rolled away, and he extended his hand with his usual bright smile, saying — exactly as if they had parted yesterday, and that on the best of terms —

"Well, where may you be trotting to?"

Poor little Margot! To find herself standing thus, with her hand in his, and his eyes smiling down at her, and his pleasant voice

sounding in her ears, was for a moment more than she could bear. She gave a little irrepressible sob and the tears rushed to her eyes. It was perhaps as well for her that everything, for a moment, swam before her gaze; else she might have seen that in Sir John's face which would have further overwhelmed her — a sudden immense tenderness, such as it had never worn before.

There was a brief pause, and then he went on talking gently, so as to give her time to recover herself. He was not quite clear as to the drift of what he was saying, but by-and-by both regained sufficient self-possession to realise that he was expressing surprise at finding her so far from home, and rallying her on her independence in treading the crowded streets alone.

"I am not naturally independent," said Margot, with a tremulous smile; she was not yet completely mistress of herself; "but I think life has made me so, and yet I — I really do not like walking in the streets alone. I am always horribly frightened."

Surely this was quite a new Margot! But Sir John thought the change very delightful. He gave her hand a little half-involuntary pres-



sure, and the girl, suddenly recalled to the fact that he was still holding it, immediately withdrew it, very gently, and colouring the while.

"I am going to see my landlord," she explained, anxious to cover the slight awkwardness of the situation. "I have written to him once or twice, but he has not answered my letters, so I think it is better to try and see him. His office is near here."

"How have you been getting on?" inquired Sir John, exactly in the old, easy, natural way.

"Not very well. Some of my pupils have left off coming, and I cannot hear of any new ones."

"Has your sister been asked to play anywhere?"

Sir John's tone was not quite so easy and natural now.

Margot shook her head. She did not dare to meet his eyes, knowing that the same thought which had so often passed through her mind was probably at that moment suggesting itself to him. Was this sudden withering of the hopes which had dazzled Valérie after her first appearance in London society due directly to Lady Rosamond Gorst, and indirectly to Sir

John himself? After a moment she stole a glance at him, and saw that her surmise was correct; he was looking vexed and perturbed.

"In any case," she said quickly, "it is not that which distresses Valérie. It might have amused her, perhaps, and been a distraction to her, but she will never be really happy until she has made her mark in public — at a concert, I mean. She longs to be recognised by the world at large — the musical world — and no minor successes would satisfy that craving."

Croft was grateful to Margot for her eager effort to stifle his self-reproach, but he remained serious, various doughty resolutions taking shape in his mind; it should not be his fault if Valérie's aspirations were not speedily gratified.

"There must be some way surely of managing these things. Could not you interview an impresario or agent of some kind?"

"Alas!" she returned, "I have indeed seen one or two. Valérie had excellent introductions from her masters in Paris, but somehow they seemed to come to nothing. When one is poor and a stranger, it is so hard to obtain a footing. These gentlemen have promised to remember



Valérie whenever there may be an opening for her, but the opening seems a long time in coming; they prefer, I suppose, to engage artists whose reputation is already established, and I have always heard that the French school of music is unpopular in England."

"Oh, I think we know how to appreciate a good thing, no matter where it comes from," observed Croft, who was enough of a John Bull to resent this imputation of insular prejudice. "I know there must be some way of getting at these fellows," he went on, with all the bravery of the Philistine. "I will make inquiries, and report to you as to the result. I suppose," he added, dropping his voice and looking earnestly at Margot, "I must not come and see you?"

There was a long pause, and then Margot answered hesitatingly —

"I think, perhaps, you had better not."

She would have liked to say more, but voice and courage alike failed her; only her eyes, those sweet eyes which said so much more than she knew, continued to plead "Do not be angry with me."

Sir John was not angry, but for a moment or two he did not relax his grave and steady

gaze; it was so new, so strange and sweet, to see his former Mentor thus palpitating in fear of his displeasure. But he did not prolong her suspense.

"You are a loyal little soul," he said, with a smile which reassured her. "Do you really mean to tell me that I must consider my musical education complete? Am I to have no more lessons? Shall I never have a chance of perfecting myself in 'Comme à vingt ans'? I fear I shall be reduced to the condition of the sentimental hero of that touching ditty — I shall have to weep, though not in the beautiful falsetto which I fondly hoped you were going to teach me."

He laughed instead, however, and Margot laughed too — a laugh with a suggestion of tears in it. She could scarcely bear to touch on a subject which had held so much pain for her, and which even yet she could not bring herself to speak of lightly. There was not much mirth in Sir John's laugh either, in spite of his jesting words.

"I should like to resume my lessons," he went on gravely; "in fact, I mean to devise some way in which I can resume them. Surely it



should not be so difficult for you to resume your functions as teacher without offending Mrs. Grundy! Supposing I were to hit upon a plan, a perfectly satisfactory plan, which would enable me to continue my lessons in a way which could not by any chance shock the susceptibilities of the greatest stickler for conventions, would you consent to take back your pupil?"

"It would be like finding a blue rose," said Margot; "that is to say, an impossibility."

"But if—"

"If," she echoed with a gentle, tolerant, little laugh, "ah, if indeed you proved yourself so clever, I would certainly agree to your marvellous plan."

"That is settled, then," said Croft. "One thing more, when we resume our lessons, will you believe that the pupil likes them?"

Margot responded with a good deal of haste and trepidation that naturally he would by that time have given so much proof of his earnestness and diligence that it would be impossible to suspect him.

"But now I must really make haste to my man's office," she pursued, "or else perhaps he

will be out. Do you know that we have been standing here, under the shadow of St. Paul's, stopping the free circulation of the passers-by, for quite a long time? See how the people are staring! I must really say good-bye. I am very glad we met."

They parted, Sir John turning his head every now and then to watch the small figure tread its way through the crowded streets, often jostled and pushed on one side. When it was out of sight, he walked on with a very serious face.



XI

MEZZA VOCE

VALÉRIE was practising when Margot returned home, and paused for a moment on hearing of the meeting with Sir John; then she resumed her playing, continuing her roulades and flourishes all the time that her sister was giving a detailed account of the event. Margot, who had expected her to be almost as much rejoiced as herself at the reconciliation with their friend, was a little disappointed; though her thoughts during her homeward way had been preoccupied with the fear that Valérie would be annoyed on hearing there was to be no question of Sir John's coming to the house. By-and-by Valérie, still continuing her playing, renewed this fear by inquiring when Sir John was coming to see them.

"He wanted to come, Valérie; but I told him I thought it would be better for him to stay away. I feared that fresh complications

might arise. Come what may, I am resolved not to run any further risks of injury to you or your career."

"Ah, my career," repeated Valérie, dropping the hand that held the bow. "Il s'agit bien de cela."

"He wanted," pursued Margot hesitatingly, "to resume his lessons here; but I told him it was impossible."

"I dare say you are right," said Valérie indifferently.

"You are not angry, darling, are you?" pursued Margot, laying her hands on Valérie's shoulders, and trying to see her face. "You know, my dear, I would gladly, gladly —"

"Ah, je me moque bien de Sir John," cried the other, wrenching herself away and turning suddenly round. "Do you think I care whether he comes to the house or not? Do you think it is anything to me if he and his big voice are never more inside this room? It is not he," she continued passionately, "who would make me feel gay now. I have a mortal sadness in my heart and in my soul. Oh, Margot, Margot, all our dreams were chimères! No one believes in me but you! Sometimes



I do not believe in myself. Oh, I think it will kill me — always hoping and waiting, and never having a chance!"

Still clinging to her violin, she began to cry so stormily that Margot felt the outburst had been long repressed.

"Are we any better off now," she sobbed after a pause, "than when we went to Brackenhurst, months ago? We had counted on doing so much this winter, and here we are exactly in the same position — waiting and waiting for something that never comes."

"Sir John said to-day," put in Margot, who was almost beside herself with distress at her sister's anguish, "that he would make inquiries. He said, if you could only obtain a temporary engagement even —"

"If M. de la Palisse was not dead he would still be alive!" interrupted Valérie with an angry sob. "If you think that Sir John Croft will get us out of our difficulties — he, who scarcely knows *fa bémol* from *si dièze!* It is indeed he who understands musical matters! Ah, my poor Margot, I know I am detestable to-day, but I am so miserable."

She laid her head on Margot's shoulder,

and Margot, clasping her sorrowfully, forgot how happy she had been a little while before.

Next morning brought a letter from Sir John.

"Dear Mademoiselle Margot, — I think I can almost grasp my blue rose. Would not four unexceptionable chaperons, all past fifty, satisfy your ideas of propriety? After parting with you to-day, I suddenly bethought me of a family of cousins who have a nice little house in Onslow Gardens, and a piano on which they seldom play. One of my cousins is a widow, and the others are unmarried. All are of the highest respectability and devoted to good works. I called on them an hour or two ago, and represented to them that they would perform an act of charity in enabling me to repair my neglected musical education by placing their piano at my disposal. They are very fond of me, and readily consented to the arrangement I suggested. They are kind, simple, unworldly people; I think you will like them. You see I talk as if I were already sure of your agreeing to my proposed plan, and perhaps I do count on it. Indeed, you must not refuse. On hearing from you, I shall have the piano



at once tuned, and we might have our first lesson on Monday."

With the letter was enclosed a cheque, and Sir John, in a postcript, apologised for having hitherto forgotten to settle their previous account, and added that he hastened to do so now, lest Mademoiselle Kostolitz might consider him an untrustworthy person, and on that account hesitate to begin fresh dealings with him.

Margot smiled; she knew very well the cheque had not been forgotten; its appearance now proved that her former surmise had been correct. Well, since they were friends again, she could take it without hesitation or regret; and, as it happened, at that particular moment it was rather acceptable, for the little exchequer was low.

She read the letter again with a medley of feelings, her face changing meanwhile from grave to gay, and then back again.

Would it be wise to accede to his desire? On the other hand, how could she find it in her heart to refuse? Would it not be strange that she should continue to see Sir John when Valérie was cut off from his society? But

then, if Valérie did not really care — She resolved to let her decide, and placed the letter before her without any comment.

Valérie read it, interrupting herself every now and then with a little laugh.

"He is funny with his four chaperons! Even you, my Margot, must surely be satisfied with so many precautions! He is certainly an admirable young man; but what does it mean, his blue rose?"

"Oh, that is nonsense," responded Margot with a laugh and a frown at the same time. "He asked me yesterday if I would consent to teach him if he could hit on a plan which would enable me to do so without giving rise to gossip. I replied that this would indeed be finding a blue rose."

"And you misapplied the metaphor, my dear," said Valérie, who was much more sprightly and like herself to-day. "It is a sacrilege to use those beautiful words in so commonplace a sense. Sir John Croft's singing-lessons are very real and substantial things, as the drums of my poor ears occasionally testify — there is nothing about them which conveys the idea of the mysterious charm always,



always escaping, which Alphonse Karr speaks of."

Margot did not answer. There was a dreamy, far-away look in her eyes, which seemed to hint that the charm of which Valérie spoke was not altogether unknown to her. But Valérie was too much preoccupied with her own thoughts to observe it.

"Sir John is lucky," she went on, "to find his roses so well within reach. He will gather them, never fear; and they will be nice, solid, red ones, with quite a sufficiency of thorns — always supposing the relations of pupil and teacher to remain the same as before. Ciel! how you used to browbeat that poor man! It is my rose, alas!" — with a swift, characteristic change of tone, an overshadowing of the face — "it is my rose, alas! which is always blue, and which grows so high — so high that I shall never reach it."

"One day, some lucky chance will lift you up, and then you shall gather it, ma mie; and when you have reached it you will find it not blue at all, but snow-white. It only looked blue because it was so near the sky. And when you hold it in your hand, you will per-

haps find that it is not a rose after all, but a star — your star, the star of Fame; and it will always be in the ascendant. There! If you want metaphors, I can give them to you, you see; a choice variety, and all prettily mixed!"

She spoke with eager, tender gaiety, anxious to prevent Valérie from falling back into the sadness of yesterday. She succeeded, for her sister began to laugh.

"Really, you have mistaken your vocation; you should have been a poet! Well, to return to Sir John and his exceedingly tangible roses. You will write and tell him that he may at once begin to make his wreath, will you not?"

"You really think I might agree, then?"

"Mon Dieu! what else is wanting to you? Is it necessary to have six duennas, par hasard? Write and tell him, of course, that his plan is very successful, and that only two of the old ladies need sit in the room at the same time; then they can relieve each other."

Margot ran away gladly to write her note. On the appointed Monday she betook herself to the house indicated by Sir John, where she found her pupil waiting to receive her and to introduce her to his four cousins. They were



gentle, simple, kindly little ladies, all at first presenting the appearance of having been cast in precisely the same mould; an impression so often conveyed by people who for years have lived together and which is so frequently erroneous. These sisters were in reality very dissimilar in mind and habits, and by-and-by Margot began to wonder how she could have imagined the mutual resemblance to be so strong. Thus, Mrs. Elkin, the widow, had been a beauty in her day and a woman of fashion; she still dressed her hair in a jaunty style, and talked about "Society" with a patronising air, though, as a matter of fact, in consequence of her delicate health she had long ceased to frequent it. Then, Miss Lennox, the eldest unmarried sister, was "blue," or what was considered "blue" forty years ago; probably a Girton girl of the present day would have scoffed at her attainments. Miss Charlotte was artistic, and painted little water-colours four inches square, with the lights scratched out with the point of a fine penknife; she also occasionally played the piano — "Brillants morceaux de Salon" — being exceedingly conscientious over the variations. She could

sing, too, in a sweet, weak little voice; but her sisters said it made them sad to hear her, so she only sang when she was alone, and then the tears would roll down her cheeks as she thought over her own private and particular romance, which had been buried years ago. Miss Maria, the youngest, was the practical member of the family; she ordered the dinner and kept the accounts. In her spare time she made poor clothes. None of your jackets and cross-overs in fancy-knitting — work which is quite presentable in any drawing-room — but good, thick, serviceable, red flannel petticoats; sometimes garments of a yet more compromising character, fashioned out of strong unbleached calico, which even in her sisters' presence she sewed at delicately, under a newspaper, and one of which, when Croft was announced, she thrust precipitately into the waste-paper basket.

All the old ladies greeted Margot very cordially, hovering about her with little gentle bowings and cooings, much reminding her somehow of the pigeons which she had seen at Brackenhurst, only that they did not strut with so conceited an air. Still, something about their bright eyes and plump little figures, their

nodding heads, their trottings to and fro, the general flutter and bustle over a very small excitement, seemed to justify the simile.

Margot felt rather nervous during this first lesson, and Sir John's attention wandered too; it really was disconcerting to find those four pairs of bright eyes fixed upon them every time one or other chanced to look away from the music; occasionally to intercept a despatch telegraphed by one sister's eyebrows and acknowledged by another's meaning nod; now and then to catch a murmured compliment: "Who would have thought that dear John had such a beautiful voice?" or "Is not her teaching admirable?" Miss Charlotte, as the recognised musician, sat well to the front, and considered it necessary to nod in time even to the studies; when the songs were reached, she murmured "Beautiful!" in an audible voice at intervals of about three minutes, each repetition invariably causing Sir John to sing out of tune. At the conclusion of the lesson, after a little conversation, Margot took her leave, Sir John declaring that he would accompany her as far as the corner of the street to make sure she caught the right omnibus.

When the door closed behind mistress and pupil, each drew a long breath; Sir John leaned for a moment against one of the columns of the portico, closing his eyes, and letting his arms drop in token of extreme exhaustion.

"I think you were premature in announcing that you intended to enjoy these lessons," remarked Margot demurely.

"At least you can never again doubt my seriousness," returned Sir John. "Dear women! Taken singly they are quite endurable, but *en masse* they are overwhelming. I really must convey to them that we cannot stand more than two of the family at a time. Will two satisfy your ideas of decorum?"

"Well, Valérie said two should be enough for anybody," returned Margot laughing. The next moment she regretted having spoken, for a quiet gleam of intelligence came into his eyes: the sisters had been discussing the situation, then.

"I think I need not trouble you to come any further," said Margot a little sharply; adding, however, with a smile, as she saw his face fall: "indeed I think I know more about omnibuses than you do."



It was such an incontestable fact that Sir John did not venture to deny it. He continued to walk beside her nevertheless, remarking that he intended to assist at the selection.

"You need not be in such a hurry," he added rather irritably; "it is quite early."

"I must get back to Valérie. Now really, Sir John, I will say good-bye here. What is the good of having four chaperons in the house if we are to dispense with them altogether out of doors?"

The justice of the query was indubitable, but Sir John experienced a little shock of surprise.

"Since when, Mademoiselle Margot," he said, looking full at her, "has it occurred to you that you and I need chaperonage? I do not think at the little house in Pitt Street it ever dawned on us that such an article was necessary."

He had scarcely uttered the words before he regretted them. He saw Margot wince and colour, and realised that almost for the first time in his life he had said a cruel thing. After a short pause, however, she answered very humbly and sweetly:

"You are quite right. I used to be much more independent; but now, I don't know how it is, I seem to feel more and more what an unkind, censorious world we live in." She held out her hand to say good-bye, and Sir John was obliged to take it and to let it go again before he could find any words with which to explain away his former speech. The girl's figure disappeared round the corner, and the man, left alone, uttered a kind of groan, and struck the pavement with his foot, to the intense astonishment of a nurse with four children, who happened to be passing by, and who continued their progress for some time with their heads hanging back over their shoulders that they might see what his next proceeding would be. But Sir John walked quietly on now, merely cursing himself in his heart for a brute and a fool.

Margot's cheeks burned hotly all the way home. She, too, was anathematising her own folly, and wondering how she could have been stupid enough to make the speech which Sir John had taken up so quickly. No wonder he thought her silly and prudish; and besides, in their relative positions, it was absurd. Well,

he had speedily put her in her place; she had not shown anger, but her heart was sore. He had never used that tone before, and it hurt her. It required a very great effort of will to enable her to talk cheerfully to Valérie, and to describe with the gaiety that was expected of her, her interview with the four chaperons.

When the next lesson-day came, only two of the Misses Lennox were in the drawing-room; Mrs. Elkin was suffering from rheumatism and confined to her room, and the scientific sister had gone to a lecture. Miss Maria was, however, seated in the window, working at one of the garments already described, or at least a very small portion of the same, the rest being modestly tucked away in her work-bag. By revealing only three inches at a time of her mysterious handiwork, the proprieties, Miss Maria considered, could not be offended; not even the penetrating eye of John Croft could form a guess as to the whole. Miss Charlotte was installed at another window, painting, with a very small brush and hardly any water, a tiny landscape destined to be a birthday card. The lesson began, Margot being very quiet, and not speaking more than was necessary. Sir John

eyed her surreptitiously, and ardently wished that his cousins would go out of the room. Whether his power of volition was strong enough to take effect on the ladies in question, or whether the heavens were moved by the turmoil in his heart is uncertain, but presently Miss Maria discovered that the constant twisting and turning consequent on her mode of operation had reduced her work to such hopeless confusion that it was absolutely impossible to proceed with it, until it had been disentangled in a spot secure from the masculine eye. She rose, therefore, announcing that she was going to another room for a few minutes, but would be back presently.

"Pray don't let me be a tie on you," said her cousin eagerly. "Neither Mademoiselle Kostolitz nor myself expect to be entertained. We have come here for business, and we don't want to be in anybody's way."

"Oh," said Miss Maria, pausing to contemplate him with her head on one side, "it is very kind of you, I am sure, John, and it is n't a tie at all; it is a pleasure. Only I *am* rather busy to-day, and if you really don't mind, I think I will go on with my cutting out. You

are quite sure you don't think me very rude, Mademoiselle Kostolitz?"

Mademoiselle Kostolitz was necessarily sure, and the little lady trotted out very much relieved.

John thereupon turned to the other cousin, in whose eyes he thought he detected a mute appeal.

"I hope, Charlotte," he said suavely, "that we are not keeping *you* from doing anything you want to do? We don't wish to be a nuisance, you know; do we, mademoiselle?" turning to Margot.

"Well, really, my dear John," responded Charlotte with delighted alacrity, "since you ask me I must tell you that I find my cobalt-blue is curdled; it is ruining my sky. I *must* run out and buy another cake. That is to say, if you really and truly won't think it very queer and impolite of me not to stay at home and entertain you."

Being reassured, the second little pigeon fluttered out cooing all the way.

Margot resumed the accompaniment of Sir John's song, scarcely lifting her eyes from the keys. She felt ill at ease and unhappy. She

had been uncomfortable enough while the old ladies had been in the room, but she was far more uncomfortable now. Sir John plodded valiantly through the first bars of his song, but broke off presently.

"Mademoiselle Margot, are you displeased with me for allowing my cousins to go?"

"No; you were doubtless quite right since they so evidently wished it," replied she, still without raising her eyes.

"You are annoyed about something, though; do not pretend you are not."

"I don't think I am annoyed," said Margot, adding quickly and inconsequently, "Perhaps I am annoyed with myself." Then she went on playing. "Shall we begin at the top of the page?"

Sir John did not respond to the invitation. Thrusting his hands deep in his pockets, he remarked gloomily, "I am sure *you* never need feel annoyed with yourself. It is only tactless, blundering, stupid idiots like me who need be that."

Margot could not help smiling at the array of adjectives. She went on playing tentatively, but her pupil did not heed.



"I felt savage enough with myself yesterday, I know," he proceeded. "I could have knocked my own head off after I left you."

Margot's face was turned away, but he could see the rim of her cheek, even the little ear nearest to him, growing crimson.

"I know I hurt you yesterday," he continued penitently; "but I really did not mean it; I assure you I did not. I felt for a moment vexed at your holding yourself aloof from me — I wanted things to be on the old footing. I did not consider what I said, nor how I said it; but do believe me, Mademoiselle Margot, I would not for the world intentionally wound you."

Margot's head was still averted and her fingers continued to press the keys, but soundlessly.

"The old footing!" she said in a low voice. "Somehow — I don't know why — I cannot feel as if things could ever go back to the old footing again."

There was an eager query in Sir John's face, but he did not speak. He, too, was conscious that his relations with Margot were changed, and, though he had complained yesterday, it

seemed to him to-day that he would not now willingly exchange the present for the past.

"I feel it is very ridiculous of me to say so," continued Margot in an altered tone; "that is why I am vexed with myself. Because I know it is silly and unreasonable of me — it is really absurd to have punctilious notions about myself. For Valérie it is of course different. I cannot be too particular, too careful about her; but to be nervous lest people might say unkind things about *me* is very silly. I do nothing that I need be ashamed of. I must be self-reliant and independent if I am to earn my own bread and Valérie's. I have had to make my own way in the world, to rely only on myself, for quite ten years — ever since my mother died, and no harm has ever come to me; no one has ever criticised my conduct unkindly."

She dropped her hand from the piano, and looked up almost defiantly; but something in Croft's face made her look away again very quickly.

"Poor little bread-winner!" he said softly. "So for ten years you have had the weight of the world on your shoulders! Why, you must have been only a child when your mother died."



"I was thirteen," said Margot. "Oh, I could not do much at first, but I soon learned. I had to look after everything; to act and think for us all. I made many blunders, but experience teaches one."

"And what was your father about all that time?" inquired Sir John indignantly.

"Oh, he — he earned some money sometimes; naturally at that age it was not I who supported the family! He could play most beautifully; it is from him that Valérie inherits her genius. He also taught us, to begin with. He had a feeling for music that was extraordinary, but he made nothing of his talent. He — Oh, I think I would rather not talk about my father; after all, he is dead."

Sir John mentally registered his deep satisfaction at the fact. "He must have been a beauty," he thought, but all he said aloud was: "He must at least have been very proud of Mademoiselle Valérie. Did he not form some plan for her artistic début?"

"Oh, yes; he used to make plans, wild plans, which never came to anything. But even before he died I felt that the responsibility of producing my sister rested with me." She

spoke so seriously that Croft did not feel inclined to smile at the quaint phrase. "But the misfortune is I have not till now been able to manage it. I do not know now how to set about it."

"Why does not your sister give a concert?" inquired Croft. "The idea struck me yesterday. Why not take a hall, advertise a little, and let her give a recital? I believe people would go, if only from curiosity, and if she were once heard her success would be assured."

"Tenez! that is an idea!" cried Margot. "We might take the Steinway Hall. I wonder whether it would be very expensive?" she added reflectively.

"I will make inquiries, if you like," said Croft. "Look here, I will find out all about it — shall I? — and let you know. It would be a venture, of course, but then, 'Nothing venture, nothing have.'"

Margot did not answer. She was engaged in a quick mental calculation of the means at her disposal. There was a little sum in the savings-bank which had been hoarded for emergencies. Presumably a sufficient number of tickets would be sold to cover expenses, but

even if the worst came to the worst, they might make up the deficit from this fund. At all events, it was worth trying."

"Shall I make inquiries?" repeated Sir John.

"Oh, yes," said Margot, recalled to herself with a start. "I should be most grateful if you would. I really think we might do it, and the mere thought of it will give new life to Valérie. But now we must positively continue our lesson," assuming a business-like tone. "Begin at the top of the page, please, and remember the change of key down here."

For the moment she was the old Margot again, eager and a little imperative; she had forgotten her lately found shyness and constraint. Croft was amused and pleased at her brightness; yet, after all, the shy Margot, the Margot who now and then spoke so tremulously, and whose eyes so often drooped before his had been very charming and lovable. But he did not regret her temporary absence, for he knew that she would soon reappear.

XII

ALLEGRO AGITATO

"REALLY, he has ideas," cried Valérie. She was sitting on the hearthrug at her sister's feet, her face flushed and excited, her eyes bright with eagerness. Croft's plan had just been laid before her. "He has more sense than one would give him credit for. He has a good head as well as a good heart, this Sir John."

Margot smiled. Sometimes the rather slighting tone in which Valérie spoke of their friend jarred on her. She knew her sister so well that her changes of mood did not puzzle her, and she quite realised that now that Valérie no longer saw John Croft, and could in consequence no longer be amused by him, his personality ceased to have the charm for her which she had formerly frankly acknowledged; but, nevertheless, her little ironical allusions to him had invariably ruffled Margot, though she



had never allowed her irritation to appear. To-day he had made a suggestion which Valérie thought good, and she therefore considered him clever; to-morrow he would probably be out of favour again. Margot was perfectly aware of the possibility, but she was inconsistent enough to feel pleased that his star was for the time in the ascendant. "It was very kind of him, was it not?" she said warmly.

"H'm, h'm — as to that, I imagine the young man finds it amusing to meddle a little in other people's affairs. Do you not think so, Margot? Directly we knew him he seemed in a manner to take possession of us. He was always suggesting this, arranging that — giving valuable advice in matters of which he knew nothing, the poor dear fellow! I wonder if he is like that with everyone."

To Margot the idea was distinctly unpleasant, and she responded with a good deal of indignation. "You talk as if Sir John were a kind of busybody, interfering in other people's business out of idle curiosity or meddlesomeness. If he has, as you say, taken possession of us, it is, as anybody can see, out of pure kindness of heart. He saw that we were poor, and he

tried to help us. He saw that we had no one to protect us, and he has tried to be our friend."

"Ho! ho!" said Valérie, with a little mocking air. "Tu y vas, ma petite! We have changed our tone of late, I see. We no longer look upon Sir John as the naughty man, the contemptible *flâneur* who betrayed our youthful confidence and took advantage of our — "

"Ah, Valérie, do not torment me so! You know as well as I do how much I have regretted those unjust suspicions of mine."

"Tiens! what little hot cheeks! No, no, I will not tease you — particularly as I am in a very good humour myself, and quite adore Sir John this morning. It is lucky he no longer comes to the house, for, in truth, I believe if I were to see him now I should be capable of embracing him on his two cheeks. There! — now you are scandalised, are you not? C'est égal. I adore Sir John, I tell you. He is a young man, wise, good, and clever beyond comparison; and, thanks to his happy idea, we are going to make such a success, Margot! Only think, to-day no one knows of our existence, and before a month has passed all London will

be at my feet perhaps! Think of that, Margot! — think of that!"

Jumping to her feet, she began dancing about the room, pirouetting among the tables and chairs, and singing for glee.

Margot looked on, with dewy, happy eyes. To her, too, it seemed that the moment of triumph must be near at hand. Surely, when people saw her Valérie, they must be captivated by her beauty, her grace, her charm; and then when they heard her play, when they discovered the great artist-soul in that delicate, exquisite body, how could there fail to be a very furore of enthusiasm! Her heart swelled within her; it seemed to sing to itself a canticle of praise and blessing all in honour of Sir John.

Meanwhile that young man was very busy, and when he next met Margot at his cousins' house he came primed and loaded with all necessary information. The sum required for the hire of the hall was considerable enough to make Margot look very grave, and, added to this, there would be the advertisements to be paid for and other incidental expenses.

"I wonder," she said, looking doubtfully and

appealingly at Croft, "if we really ought to do it? It seems a great deal to risk, and if — if it fails, what shall we do?"

"It cannot fail," said Sir John eagerly; he had matured a little plan of his own by means of which he meant to insure the sisters against all possible loss. "If you do not take some such step I do not see how, under the circumstances, you are ever to get on. At all events, your progress will, I am afraid, be slow and uncertain; whereas this one bold stroke might bring you fame and prosperity at once."

Margot gazed at him thoughtfully. "Yes, it is true," she said; "and Valérie would be so terribly disappointed if we gave up the idea now. But still, is it right to venture so much for an uncertainty? Do you really advise me to carry out the plan?"

"Most certainly I do," replied Sir John, with prompt and joyous decision. He himself felt absolutely confident of Valérie's success, and in any case he was determined to provide against the possibility of pecuniary loss.

"Then we will look upon the matter as settled," said the girl, walking towards the piano. As she opened the music she added,



hurriedly and wistfully, "I am sure you would not be so urgent in advising me if it were not really wise and safe."

"I am quite positive that you are doing the right thing," said Croft, soberly, but quite as resolutely as before. He felt that a great weight of responsibility rested upon him, but he would not shrink from it. He meant to carry the thing through. After the first preliminaries had been arranged, the day definitely fixed for the concert, the advertisements sent out, and tickets actually on sale, he proceeded to put his plan into execution. It was a very simple one, and very characteristic of the originator in its single-hearted if somewhat indiscreet zeal and generosity. He meant to pay out of his own pocket for a sufficient number of tickets to cover all expenses; these he would distribute among his friends, thereby securing to the sisters a considerable number of well-dressed and appreciative hearers, whose presence would confer distinction on the affair, and whose interest, once enlisted, might possibly procure for Valérie further advantages in the future. Thus indemnified from loss, the money taken for tickets sold in the ordinary way would

be all clear gain to the sisters. No possible harm could, therefore, Sir John considered, result from this step, which must in every way tend to their advancement. He had felt himself, in consequence, quite justified in advising it, and had no qualms in reflecting on his urgency. He used all discretion in putting the project into execution, buying the tickets here and there, a few at a time, and sending Sturgess as his emissary when he found it necessary to get several at the same place. He thought it a bold stroke of policy to secure front seats for his friends. It seemed to him that these smart people would look well in prominent positions; besides, they themselves would like it, he felt sure.

It never occurred to him that there might be difficulty in filling the places he had taken such pains to engage. Everybody liked music — more or less; everybody liked a novelty, and everybody that Sir John knew liked *him;* therefore it was not conceivable that, when he sent his friends free tickets for a concert at a time of year when they were presumably not overburdened with engagements, and when he told them of the youthful charm of the new violinist,



and asked their patronage as a favour to himself, it was not possible, he thought, that the friends in question should fail to accede with alacrity to his request.

He was a little chilled, however, by the attitude assumed by the first lady to whom he made known his wishes. He had always considered her a special ally of his; he dined at her house, on an average, four or five times in a season; she invited him to all her balls, and sent him cards for other people's. In return he danced with her daughters when he found it convenient to be present at these festivities, and wrote polite little notes when he would rather go anywhere else; facts which denoted him to be rather a punctilious young man, and in some respects quite behind the times.

Therefore when he intimated to Mrs. Marjoribanks that he intended to send her some tickets for Mademoiselle Kostolitz's concert, it was rather with the air of one bestowing a favour than hoping to receive one. But Mrs. Marjoribanks drew herself up in a way which rather disconcerted him.

"Mademoiselle Kostolitz," she remarked

stiffly, "who is Mademoiselle Kostolitz, may I ask?"

"She is the latest novelty," responded Sir John; "in fact, she is so very exceedingly new, that no one has even heard of her as yet. But after this concert you will hear a great deal about her, if I am not mistaken."

The eldest Miss Marjoribanks looked at her mother; the second Miss Marjoribanks looked at Sir John — then she looked away again. He began to feel uncomfortable. Mrs. Marjoribanks leaned back a little further in her arm-chair and considered him for a moment from beneath her drooped eyelids; then she inquired quietly: "And how did *you* come to hear of her, Sir John?"

"Oh, I met her at Brackenhurst last summer," he replied, annoyed to feel himself reddening.

Mrs. Marjoribanks again exchanged glances with her eldest daughter.

"I thought it was probably the same," she said composedly, turning to him again. "You see a good deal of her, don't you?"

"Her sister gives me singing-lessons," returned Croft, almost sharply.



"Singing-lessons!" said Mrs. Marjoribanks, sitting upright; then she laughed, her daughters joining in her merriment.

"How funny!" they said.

"To think that all this time, all the years we have known you, you have been hiding your gift from us," cried one.

"We never suspected you of being in the least musical," said the other.

"One lives and learns, you see," remarked Croft, calmly; "till now I have been the little bird who could sing and would n't sing."

"And now Mademoiselle — what is her name — Carlowitz, she is making you sing, is she?" rejoined the mother with rather acrid humour.

"In course of time I hope she will," said Sir John. "When one begins to go to school at my time of life, one does not attain perfection in a minute. Well, I will send you the tickets, and if any of your friends would like to go too, I will let you have some more."

"Dear me," said Mrs. Marjoribanks, looking very much astonished, while the youngest damsel, who was exceedingly up to date, remarked flippantly that Sir John was evidently running the show.

"They don't know very many people in London, you see," he said seriously. "So I thought I would help to dispose of a few tickets for them."

"I understood," said Mrs. Marjoribanks with lazy impertinence, "that these tickets were to be presented to us. May I ask, are we to be indebted for them to you, or to Mademoiselle Carlowitz?"

"When I make an offering to my friends, I generally consider that they are indebted to me," said Croft, still coolly, though he was beginning to feel angry.

"How generous of you! And you not only make the offering to me, but to my friends! You appear to have an unlimited number of tickets at your disposal."

"Les amis de nos amis sont nos amis," said Croft lightly. The fact is, I want the right sort of people to go to this concert, as it is the first one — you know so much depends on a good start, does it not? Now, if you were really nice, Mrs. Marjoribanks, you would get a few of your friends to go."

"Thanks for the implied compliment. But it is very cold for concert-going, is n't it? Is

your Mademoiselle — whatever her name is — going to have any one to support her — any other musician I mean?"

"Mademoiselle Kostolitz will be accompanied by her sister, who plays the piano beautifully."

There was another little murmur of laughter from the girls.

"Sir John knows all about music now," said one.

"I think," repeated Mrs. Marjoribanks, with languid amusement, "it is too cold for concerts, and a violin recital is apt to be a wearisome thing unless the player is really very, very good. No thanks, Sir John, I don't think I will take the tickets; if I did I probably should not use them, and then you would be vexed. It is better to be honest, is n't it?"

Croft stayed a few moments longer, talking on indifferent subjects that his annoyance might not be too evident; and then he went away.

That same afternoon he came across a sprightly young friend of his, who wrote for the "Society" papers, and the idea flashed across him that if he could secure this man's

kind offices for his friends the gain to them would possibly be great. Meanwhile the young journalist was inquiring with some surprise how it was that Sir John was not in Paris.

"Paris," echoed Croft vaguely. He had forgotten all about the intended trip to which his chance meeting with Margot had put an end.

"The last time I saw you," resumed the other, you told me you were going there for some time."

"Oh yes," said Sir John; "yes, I did mean to go, and then I did n't."

Oh," said his friend looking curiously at him, and struck with a certain air of subdued excitement which was perceptible in tone and manner.

"Look here," went on Croft quickly; "you can do me a good turn if you like. I wish you would. Some friends of mine are giving a concert next week. You may have seen it advertised — Mademoiselle Kostolitz's recital at the Steinway Hall. I wish you would announce it with a little flourish of trumpets in some of your various papers; and if you go, and write of it afterwards, it will be still better."

"Oh," said the young journalist again, "Who is Mademoiselle Kostolitz? New importation?"

"Well, she has been for some months in England, but this is the first time she appears in public. She is quite young — just eighteen — and a very pretty, taking creature. You will be pleased if you go."

He felt a certain sense of disloyalty in speaking thus of Margot's sister to a stranger, but he was most anxious to secure the man's influence. "There will be a ticket sent you, of course, if you will use it," he persisted.

"All right," returned the other, who seemed much amused. "Well, I will turn up, if I am not due anywhere else. Friend of yours, is she?"

"Well, perhaps I should say an acquaintance. Her sister gives me singing-lessons. They do not know many people and so I am interested in them."

"Oh yes," said the journalist, laughing in an odd way, which Sir John thought quite uncalled for. "All right, old chap, I 'll set about blowing the trumpet at once, and I 'll turn up if I can."

Croft went back to his rooms, feeling exasperated and dispirited. He was going to have more bother about those tickets than he had anticipated; he thought he would not again try to offer them in person. That night, accordingly, he despatched several notes, offering the tickets in an off-hand way to certain of his friends, and casually mentioning that he was interested in the lady in question, and would be pleased if they would patronise her performance.

Fresh disappointment awaited him here; some of his notes remained unanswered, while the replies he did receive were eminently unsatisfactory. One or two people returned the tickets, others were not sure of being able to go; no one seemed pleased or cordial. Sir John could not make it out. He resolved to call on the lady at whose house Valérie had once played; she at least knew what her capabilities were, and would be able to help him in the matter. He must in some way have blundered, that all his overtures should be thus repulsed. On the morning on which he formed this determination he received a letter from Lady Mary Bracken, telling him that she was

in town on business, and wished particularly to see him on a most important matter. "Something about the district nurse," he thought impatiently; but he was pleased all the same. He would enlist his aunt in the cause of his friends. He was now beginning to feel seriously uneasy. Supposing he was not able to dispose of these wretched tickets, and that Valérie on her début, found, instead of the fashionable throng by which he had meant to add importance to the assembly, merely numbers of empty places! Margot had spoken to him only a few days before with great glee of the rapid sale of the tickets.

"Already," she had said joyously, "we have sold more than enough to pay for the Hall—think of that! I was so afraid at first, not merely for the sake of the money, but because it is so important for Valérie that this first concert should be well attended; she would be dreadfully discouraged if she saw empty benches."

A cold shiver of horror came over Sir John whenever he recollected these words; what if he were unable to fill those empty places he knew of! Now the thought of Lady Mary's advent came as a relief.

His first call, however, that afternoon was on his other friend; he expected great things of her, she was a shrewd and clever woman, well versed in the ways of the world, exceedingly popular, and very fond of Sir John, whom she had known intimately since their childhood.

She received him with great cordiality; but, when he made known his errand, laughed in his face.

"What!" she cried, "the eternal Kostolitz?"

"What do you mean by that?" inquired Sir John. He was standing with his back to the chimney-piece and looked down upon her with angry eyes.

She smiled at him tolerantly, and pointed to a low chair near her.

"Sit down, John," she said, "I want to talk to you. You are just the same Don Quixote as in the old days, when you used to reprimand my governess if you thought her unjust to me; you meant so well, my poor dear fellow, but she used to be ever so much crosser to me afterwards. Do you see the moral I am trying to point? You want to help these pretty little musicians, and you are simply doing them harm — you are making them ridiculous."

Croft did not answer, though the expression of his face would have startled his friend, had she looked at him; but, conscious that her remark must be disagreeable to him, she was contemplating, while speaking, the embroidered tips of her pretty shoes.

"You know," she continued in almost coaxing tones, "nobody can help laughing when they hear of your suddenly developed enthusiasm in musical matters; you, who never pretended to know one note from another? Except in a hunting chorus, I don't suppose anyone has ever heard your voice; therefore when at thirty-two you begin to take singing-lessons, when you devote yourself to the interests of a pretty young violinist of the female sex, constitute yourself her cicerone, try to hunt up pupils for her, beg for invitations for her, and finally wander about from door to door — a sort of musical bagman — imploring people to take tickets for her concert; well, you know, my dear John, it really is a little absurd! I assure you I have been in at least six houses lately where everybody was talking about it. You went about the business in such a wholesale way, you see, people can't help laughing. If

it had been anybody but you, everyone would think the business a little *queer* — I dare say even as it is some people do — but those who know you as I do" — she looked at him suddenly with kindly twinkling eyes — "to be an honest, well-meaning, and conscientious sort of person, well, they only laugh and wonder who is this girl that Sir John Croft is so crazy about? She can't be much of a musician or he would n't be working so hard to scrape together an audience for her. People are ill-natured, my dear John, and that is what they say."

She looked at him now, laughing lightly, but the laugh died away when she saw the pained gravity of his face. Margot's words, spoken on two occasions, returned to him now: "You are making us a laughing-stock;" and then again: "The world is an unkind, censorious place."

"Now you are vexed," said his friend.

"No; I am only thinking it is a pity one cannot be sometimes a little kind and good-natured without being considered either a knave or a fool. I begin to think I have been a fool, though."

He uttered this afterthought in a tone of

such boyish dismay that the pretty woman by his side was forcibly reminded of the play-fellow of former days. Leaning forward, she tapped his hand with the freedom of old times.

"Don't look so woe-begone! Come, you had better tell me all about it. Are you in love with Valérie Kostolitz?"

"In love with Valérie!" He laughed with such genuine amusement that his friend was reassured; then, becoming serious again, he made full confession to this sympathetic hearer of his somewhat rash advice to the sisters Kostolitz with reference to the concert, and the still rasher project by which he had sought to guarantee them against all loss.

"Well, it certainly was the wildest idea," she said, laughing. "But never mind; since they run no real risk, and will get their money back in any case, there will be no harm done after all. If you like to spend your money in that way, you can certainly afford it."

"But I want the venture to be successful," urged Croft miserably. "They have built so much on it, and if the Hall is not full they will be so disappointed."

"Well, *you* won't fill it for them; you need n't

hope to do so. I will do what I can to pass on some of these terrible tickets, but I don't promise much. When your friend's fame is established people will flock to hear her, no doubt; but now, my dear John, if they are not inclined to come I can't make them."

"They were glad enough to listen to her here," he said gloomily.

"Yes; that was a different matter. If I can get at any of the really musical people who were here that night I might persuade them, perhaps; but I assure you they are few and far between. Half the good folks who applauded her so vigorously knew as much about music as — well, as I should have said *you* did, John, before I was aware of your hidden talent."

This was said with such a charmingly impertinent smile that he could not resent it; but he went away little comforted.

Lady Mary was now his last hope. He found her in the library of her large, comfortable house in Cadogan Place — a room which, however, looked dismal enough to-day, the books being still tucked away under their winter coverings and the furniture in the pina-

fores generally only assumed during their owner's absence.

"I told them they need not unpack the things," she explained; "I am only here for a few days on business. Yes, my dear John, I have had great disappointments. My 'Mothers' Training Guild' has turned out a dead failure!"

Sir John sat down beside her on a holland-covered sofa, assuming an expression of due concern.

"What! Won't the mothers allow themselves to be trained?" he inquired.

"I don't know how it is," responded Lady Mary disconsolately, "they don't seem to want to come any more now. I had just got it all into such nice working order; the subscriptions were merely nominal, John, and I had arranged that anyone who wished it could bring their own food and be taught to cook it properly; but the idea does not seem to take, somehow. And the worst of it is those who did go through a course of training don't seem to put it into practice. I found Mrs. Miggins giving her husband coffee the other day that was simply disgraceful — almost as thick as gruel. Just boiled in a saucepan and poured out, grounds

and all; and she had been taught to do it so beautifully — to clear it with an egg, you know, when there is not a proper coffee-pot. But there is no use arguing with such people; she said she could not spare the egg, and that Miggins thought the grounds gave the coffee a kind of richness."

John laughed, but Lady Mary remained very serious. Her bonnet had slipped even more than usual to the back of her head, and she looked generally dilapidated and despondent.

"Here I am, left with this great building on my hands," she continued. "I have such a plan, such a lovely plan, if I could only make it work. I thought of instituting a 'Haven for Aged Respectable Married Paupers.' It always wrings my heart to think of the poor old people obliged to go to the workhouse after living honestly and respectably for fifty or sixty years. I always think it is so cruel, so unjust that they should have no home life. Don't you, John?"

Tears were actually standing in her eyes; there could be no doubt of the sincerity of her compassion. He acquiesced warmly, and she went on with enthusiasm:

"I thought, you know, when any really deserving case of the kind came under the notice of the Board of Guardians they could just send it on to me. I dare say in time the Haven might be made to pay — the old men could chop wood, perhaps, and the women could knit or something; but the thing would be to make a start. You see, I have actually no funds at my disposal now. In fact, the winding up of the Training Guild affairs left me more or less in debt; and so I have been thinking —"

Whatever Lady Mary's charitable plans might have been, Sir John was not destined to hear them that day, for he gave a sudden turn to the conversation by inquiring:

"Are you thinking of giving another concert?"

His aunt's face changed. Energetically seizing her bonnet, she settled it firmly on her head, and seemed to prepare herself for business.

"John," she said seriously, "that just reminds me. I want to talk to you. I sent for you. It is very important. In fact, I have been quite put out. John, what have you been doing with that little fiddling girl?"

"I have been trying to get people to take tickets for her concert," he returned dolorously, confessing the trouble at that moment uppermost in his mind.

"And do you drive about with her in hansoms, like Nicholas Nickleby and the Phenomenon? I always thought that such a ridiculous bit. Do you remember the blue gauze trousers and the green parasol?" Herewith Lady Mary's face relaxed, and she laughed, wrinkling up her nose with genuine enjoyment. "Yes, yes, the Phenomenon and Miss Snevellici. Dear, dear, how absurd! But really, John, I don't think it is quite the right thing for you to do."

"My dear aunt," said Croft, laughing too, but inwardly annoyed, "I took Mademoiselle Kostolitz once to a concert, because her sister could n't go with her. I am trying to dispose of a few tickets for them now, without their knowledge even, because they are poor and don't know many people. After all, why may not I try to do a little good in my own way? You like village mothers and aged paupers. I like to give a helping hand to young musicians."

"Well, to be sure, that is true! Yes. All the same, you know, my dear boy, people won't look at it in that light. They 'll think you are — well — what the village people would call 'carrying on' with Miss Kostolitz, and really, as you met the poor little girl at my house, I consider myself to a certain extent responsible, and so that 's why I sent for you. It does n't do, you know; it really does n't. You can't mix yourself up in other people's affairs, particularly girls', without people thinking there is some reason for it. Now, take my advice, and leave that girl alone."

Sir John was much annoyed, but endeavoured to disguise the fact, replying calmly: "I assure you, Aunt Mary, Mademoiselle Kostolitz and I have no evil designs on each other. Now listen, let us make a bargain. If you will get twenty people to go to her concert, I will give you twenty pounds for your Paupers' Haven. I 'll send you the tickets, free tickets, of course, so you will have no trouble about it. Now do."

"Twenty pounds! Really, John, you are generous; but it is a true charity, I assure you. It is the most piteous thing to see the poor old folk vegetating in the workhouse. I have often

cried about it; and old Betty Slowcome told me that though she and her husband were almost starving, they would rather live without a crust than go to the House."

"I am very sorry for them," said Sir John. "But a bargain 's a bargain. You must get me my twenty people before I give you your twenty pounds; and look here, you must n't say anything about *me*, of course. You can say you are doing it because you are interested in Mademoiselle Kostolitz. After all, you did have her at Brackenhurst, so it will seem quite natural. You 'll set to work to-morrow, won't you?"

"To-morrow," said Lady Mary meditatively; "I was thinking of going to Whitechapel for a long day. There is an institution there —"

"Oh, hang the institution! Think of my empty places. Now, aunt, you 'll do it, won't you? You really will do your best. You won't go frittering away your time in slumming, and that sort of thing? You 'll promise me to hunt up as many of your friends as you can?"

His aunt looked at his eager, excited face in displeased astonishment.

"My paupers are certainly deserving of every help," she observed, after a pause. "In this



case the end justifies the means; but I don't like the business, John, and I don't understand you. There is something behind it — you need n't pretend there is n't."

She fixed her sharp eyes on him for a minute, and then continued deliberately: "If it is n't one sister it is the other. I believe it *is* the other. I myself liked her the better of the two, and, now that I think of it, you told me you did too, and, of course, she 's the one who gives lessons. Well, she is a nice little thing, and if you get her talked about you 'll be sorry. There, go away now, I have got letters to write. I 'll do what I can about this tiresome concert, and I 'll go — yes, I will go; but if you take my advice you will keep away. There, go off now."

"All right," said her nephew, "I am going."

He sought his hat and stick with an apparent leisureliness, ill-suited to the turmoil of his thoughts, then kissed his aunt lightly on the forehead, and went out of the room, Lady Mary calling after him that he must open the door for himself, as there were so few servants in the house. While he lit his cigarette in the hall he remarked to himself: "It is all very well to say 'leave her alone.' The question is, Can I?"

XIII

ADAGIO CON TENEREZZA

THE eventful day of the concert dawned, cold, wet, and windy, with a biting, penetrating wind, that seemed to find out the inner recesses of everyone's being, the better to produce misery and discomfort therein. Sir John set out in the afternoon for the Steinway Hall, in a state as nearly approaching ill-humour as so genial a man was capable of. The rain drifted into his hansom until he was obliged to let down the glass; and then the wind circled in cold, damp eddies through the interstices.

There was certainly no appearance of a crowd at the door; but then he had come early on purpose. Within, the hall was so far but sparsely filled. He sat down in the place allotted to him by Margot, who had presented him with a ticket, and waited anxiously. He felt too nervous to endeavour to pass the time by going round to see Valérie and her sister. He wished ardently

now that he had never volunteered his advice at all — the weight of the responsibility so lightly assumed seemed actually to crush him. If this concert were a failure, he told himself that he would have deserved the bitterest reproaches with which Margot had assailed him in bygone days; he would almost merit that she should now withdraw her confidence from him altogether.

People were beginning to arrive at last; the cheaper places at the sides and in the rear of the hall were fairly well occupied. Ah! here were the Lennoxes, and Margaret Elkin — good little souls! They looked quite nice. They had donned their Sunday best, and Margaret had such a smart bonnet. They walked up the hall, smiling broadly all the way. Croft rose and went to meet them.

"You see we have all come," said Miss Charlotte, "though it is rather a bad day for Margaret's rheumatism; still, as you made a point of it, John, we thought we would venture."

"Mademoiselle Kostolitz offered to send us tickets," put in Miss Maria; "but we told her you had given us some, and she was quite pleased — and a good deal surprised, I think."

Meanwhile, Mrs. Elkin's eyes had been roaming round the hall.

"I don't see anybody here I know," she remarked; "but I dare say more people will come presently. I hope, for Miss Kostolitz' sake, that a great many will."

"Well, *we* came in force, did we not?" cooed Miss Charlotte. "We shall make quite a brave show, sha n't we, John? — all four of us, you see."

"Oh, Charlotte, I wish there were a dozen of you," groaned Sir John, fervently. The sisters fluttered on, much amused and flattered, and Sir John turned a distracted glance towards the nearest entrance. Ah! here was Lady Mary, followed by a stout lady with three daughters, every one of whom had "country cousin" writ large all over her person. He hailed their appearance with rapture.

"Where are the other sixteen?" he asked breathlessly.

"My dear, you did n't suppose I was going to drive them before me like a flock of geese? Besides, I have n't got sixteen more. I could only scrape together another two or three. You see, most of my friends are out of town, and yesterday I was so busy —"

"You did n't keep your promise, in fact," interrupted her nephew, turning from her curtly.

The hall was not so very empty now, he thought, glancing round once more; no, really there were a good many people, some of them doubtless relations of Margot's pupils — he seemed to notice among them several instances of the type of school-girl described by Valérie. In that case, he feared, not very much profit would result to the sisters. Still, no one could say the hall was empty, he remarked to himself, more hopefully; not empty enough to discourage Valérie — if only those horrid places for which he was responsible could find occupants! To his excited gaze these vacant seats seemed glaringly perceptible; if untenanted, they would strike Valérie's eyes at once when she emerged on the platform.

"Still disconsolate!" said a voice at his elbow. He started and looked round. It was the lady on whose assistance he particularly counted.

"Well, what have you done for me?" he inquired eagerly.

"I have come to your concert on this horrible day," she returned, with an expressive shiver.

"Ugh! — how cold it is! I think it is extremely good-natured of me."

"Yes, indeed, it is awfully good of you," agreed Sir John, with a sinking heart. "But have n't you been able to — "

"I did persuade a few people to promise they would come, but really I don't think they can be expected to this weather. I should not have come out to-day if I could have helped it, I know. Well, where am I to go — up at the top? I suppose I may choose any seat I like; you certainly won't fill them." She was, and looked, cross and bored; she really had worked hard in Sir John's cause, and it was not her fault if people would not come out on such an exceedingly disagreeable day; therefore he need not have looked so disappointed.

She swept on, half-expecting him to follow her, but he returned to his own place, a despair, almost ludicrous when the cause was taken into consideration, having now taken possession of him. Oh, those front rows! They were not half — not a quarter — full. Sir John gazed at them till they seemed to swim and dance before his eyes. Then a faint stir made him look up: Valérie stood on the platform. He saw her

pause and look round with what seemed to him a blank, astonished stare. She was very white; her face looked even haggard in the strong light; her white dress, planned with so much care, as he knew, appeared to enhance her pallor. It seemed to him that she scarcely looked pretty. She began to play a sonata of Grieg's of exceeding difficulty, but whether she were in reality nervous and unstrung, or whether Croft's disordered fancy cheated him, she had not gone far before he said to himself that she was "not in her usual form." He thought he had never heard her playing so expressionless; once or twice he even fancied she made mistakes. In any case, this inaugurating piece left the audience cold; only a slight modicum of applause was granted to her at the close, though Sir John clapped until the palms of his hands were sore, and Lady Mary, leaning forward in her front bench, hammered the floor vigorously with her umbrella. Croft's spirits fell to a yet lower depth than before, if that were possible. So much depended on the beginning, both for Valérie herself and for her hearers; and the beginning had not been auspicious. Player and audience were not in sympathy; if he felt

it, how patent must the fact be to Valérie. His eyes wandered from her to Margot, resting on the latter with sudden wonder and delight. If the one sister had not done herself justice, the other was looking her best; her cheeks were flushed, her eyes were shining. He knew by the expression of her face that she had braced herself to meet the ordeal, and was straining every nerve to atone for Valérie's shortcomings. It seemed to him that for the time she was the greater artist of the two. Never had he heard her play so well — with such vigour and *aplomb*, and at the same time with so much grace and feeling. Though Sir John had been tardy in his musical studies, and but for the accident of his friendship with the Kostolitzes might never have pursued them at all, and though it pleased his friends to make a jest of his new-found enthusiasm in matters appertaining to the art, he had, nevertheless, a natural and very true love of music. Moreover, he was by nature sympathetic and appreciative, therefore it was with real artistic delight that he noted Margot's performance to-day.

But soon this æsthetic admiration of her playing merged, as he looked and listened, into

a warmer and more tender admiration of her actual personality. Dear, plucky little girl; she would not give in! The odds to-day were against Valérie's success, but she would struggle to the last — cover their defeat by a brave semblance of triumph. He watched her little fingers as they flew over the keys — clever, capable little fingers, which worked so hard and achieved so much, how slender and pretty they were — the hands of an aristocrat, as he had thought once before. Then he looked at the little high-bred head, set so proudly on the slender neck; at the soft hair, among the coils of which sparkled the comb which had long ago called forth the animadversions of Lady Rosamond Gorst. Dainty little head! Diamonds would become it better than the cheap crystals which it wore. Diamonds! The Croft diamonds! After all, why not? Where could he find a wife so rare, and sweet, and entirely lovable? Lovable! The word was ineffectual and tame. She was already loved, deeply and passionately; and in his heart of hearts he knew that she loved in return.

So, while Valérie, with a white face and a sinking heart, faced a disappointed audience, and Margot did all that could be done with the in-

tricate accompaniments, Sir John smiled to himself and dreamed. Perhaps, indeed, it would be more appropriate to say he found himself suddenly awake. He had been living in a dream for many weeks, and at last his eyes were open. The darkness, pregnant though it had been with sweetness, had rolled away, and now daylight, sweeter still and bright, was flooding his soul. L'esprit du réveil had come to him. He knew now the meaning of the vague, intangible hope and joy which had haunted this dream of his; he had felt them near during the night, and had, as it were, groped ineffectually after them. Now in broad day he could see and grasp the reality. He loved Margot Kostolitz, and he would make her his wife!

How sweet it would be to clasp those little active, toiling hands and bid them rest in his; to tell her that she should have done with poverty and anxiety and disappointment, that she need suffer and struggle no more! How delightful it would be to lavish on her all that his great wealth could procure! Sir John was the least snobbish of men, and yet he felt a glow of pride and triumph at the thought of his position, his honoured name, his vast possessions,

since Margot was to share them. As he pondered over all that he meant to do for her and pictured her surprise, her timid incredulous joy, his own soul was flooded with a rapture akin to intoxication.

What! people were going away! Was the recital over already? The temperate applause which had greeted each item in the programme, and to which he had mechanically added his quota, had ceased. Valérie and Margot had disappeared. Some one was shutting the piano. There was a stir — murmur of voices. Everyone was leaving. Rousing himself quickly, he hastened round to present himself before the sisters. There were a few others in the room, but Valérie's back was turned towards them, and she was apparently busying herself with the fastenings of her wrap. Margot, however, stood well in view, and had a gracious word for all who spoke to her, and a brave, bright smile. Croft went up to her hastily, with his head still in the clouds.

"Well, was it not a success?" he cried.

The smile disappeared, and she looked at him an instant before replying under her breath in Hungarian.

"You call that a success? Valérie will break her heart, I think. I feared she would give way before the end. Did you not see she was not in the least like herself? She did not do herself justice."

"Well, if so, you more than made up for it. I never heard you play so well in my life."

"Oh, I!" with an impatient gesture. "What does it matter about me? I tried to cover her confusion, that was all. You see, she was disheartened from the outset. Why, there were rows and rows of empty places! She was taken by surprise, because we heard the tickets were going off so well. But I suppose it was the weather. Fortune never seems to favour us."

Sir John had come down to earth again at the sound of the words "empty places," and now looked startled and confused. He was, however, coward enough to catch eagerly at the suggestion that the weather was the cause.

"Yes, has n't it been a beastly day? I am sure lots of people would have come if it had not been for that. Well, I think I had better get you a cab, had n't I? It is pouring still, I believe, and you must both be so tired. May n't I say a word to your sister first, though?"



"I think you had better not," said Margot.

The expression of Valérie's little back was, indeed, distinctly forbidding. He lingered a moment longer to say: "You know really it did not go off as badly as you think. Some of the people near me were quite enthusiastic."

But here Margot interrupted him with a little exasperated gesture, at which he fled.

A few minutes afterwards he was putting the sisters into the four-wheeler he had found for them. He had offered his arm to Valérie in escorting them thither, but she had refused it curtly, and it was Margot's hand which had rested on it during the transit; he felt this hand tremble, and noticed that when the effort to keep up appearances was no longer necessary, she looked pale and sad; indeed, as the light of a street lamp fell upon her face, it seemed to him that she was on the point of tears. As he stood by the cab door, distressed and remorseful, cudgelling his brains in search of consoling words which would not come, Valérie suddenly leaned forward from the interior.

"So much for your idea!" she cried furiously. "It has been a complete failure, and it is all your fault."

He was so taken aback by the unexpectedness of the onslaught that he stood by the door, gazing at her in absolute silence. But his defence was instantly and energetically taken up by a well-known voice in the rear, and Lady Mary Bracken hurried forward.

"What is that she says? Well, I do call that too bad. The poor fellow has been slaving. Where is she? Where is Miss Kostolitz? It is so dark coming out. Oh, there you are! How do you do?" rapidly shooting two bony fingers past her nephew's shoulder into the interior of the vehicle. "I am sure you ought n't to scold Sir John; he has been wearing himself to a fiddlestring trying to dispose of tickets for you. I assure you he sent me twenty, and he has been pestering everyone I know."

"Twenty-eight Pitt Street!" almost shouted Sir John to the driver, who had been looking round impatiently from under his dripping oil-skin hat. "Now stand aside, my dear aunt, or you 'll be run over."

Margot leant back in the cab, breathless and astonished. Valérie was in too great a passion to catch the drift of all Lady Mary said, but Margot heard and understood.

The words, coupled with Miss Maria Lennox's guileless announcement of Sir John's generosity towards them, and the hitherto inexplicable fact that the number of seats occupied in no way tallied with the quantity of tickets sold, made patent to her in a moment the whole of Croft's abortive project. It seemed to her that life could hold no further or certainly no more bitter depth of humiliation. She was not angry or resentful — she was too profoundly wounded for that — but she felt as though she could never look him in the face again. If only she could keep the knowledge from Valérie! With a little care, perhaps, she need never know.

Valérie would certainly never forgive him. Ah, it was too much! He had treated them as though they were children, duped them — with the best intentions in the world, it was true — but still, duped them. He was kind and generous, and had meant to help them, yet — oh! it was cruel. She responded absently, with a few soothing words spoken at random, to Valérie's tirade of passionate invective, but her mind was in a whirl. Why, merely from a financial point of view, this was a disastrous calamity! Sir John, of course, must be refunded for his out-

lay — it was not to be borne that he should indemnify them out of his own pocket against the loss which would otherwise certainly have been theirs. They had not yet fallen so low as to accept money from him; he should be repaid, and that at once, though the act of restitution must engulf all Margot's savings. Yes, they would find themselves, now, owing to this ill-judged venture, ever so much worse off than they had been before. They had lost money and *prestige* — and oh! was there not a worse loss than any of these — where could their confidence now be, in the friend who had deceived them? That night was passed by Margot in feverish unrest; she longed for day, for the moment in which it would be possible to rid herself of at least a portion of the load which weighed on her so heavily. In the morning she would meet Sir John at his cousins' for his customary lesson, would tax him with the deception he had recently practised, and ascertain the exact sum he had expended on their behalf. It seemed to her that she could scarcely breathe until she had freed herself from this obligation. If only the little ladies were out of the way — if she could even count on five minutes alone with

him — what should she do if she were not given time and opportunity to disburden herself of this nightmare of humiliation?

Fortune seemed to favour her wishes, for when she entered the Lennoxes' drawing-room she found Sir John Croft waiting for her alone. She had expected him to appear conscience-stricken and confused; she had indeed anticipated evidence on his part of the trepidation with which he usually awaited her displeasure. Surely he must know that she was displeased — no, not displeased — hurt to the heart's core; but he came forward to meet her with hand outstretched, and eager, excited face. He, too, had been counting the moments that must pass till her coming, and awaited it not with remorse, but with joyful impatience.

His aspect was so different from what Margot had expected that she drew back, turning a shade paler than before. She was surprised, wounded afresh, that he should be so lightly affected by what had made so profound an impression on her; but, perhaps, after all, he did not know that she had guessed his secret.

"Sir John," she said tremulously, "I am glad to have this opportunity of speaking to you."

She paused: it was hard to say what she had been prepared to say, with those ardent joyous eyes fixed on hers.

"I, too, wish to speak to you," he answered, "and have told my cousins to leave us alone for a few moments. They think we have business together connected with the concert, good souls! and have promised not to disturb us."

"The business on which I wish to speak to you is connected with the concert," said Margot. She was trembling so that she could hardly stand and her voice shook, but mastering herself with a strong effort, she continued more firmly, "Sir John, I have guessed something."

"Have you?" he rejoined, still looking at her gaily and tenderly. "I wonder how much you have guessed!"

"Oh, do not laugh at me!" with a little burst of pained irritation. "How can you laugh after humiliating me as you have done!"

"I!" exclaimed Sir John, this time with a start of genuine surprise.

"Yes. Can you imagine for a moment that I could fail to be wounded and humbled on discovering the trick you have played Valérie and me?"

"Oh you mean about the tickets?" interposed Croft; he reddened a little, but still smiled as he looked at her.

"I do mean about the tickets," said Margot, and to her intense annoyance the words came out with a sob — how could he stand smiling at her when he had treated her so? Why could she not find words to upbraid him, to humble him as he had humbled her? How was it that, do what he might, she could not be angry with him?

At the sound of her sob the jubilant expression fled from Sir John's face and was replaced by one of concern. He did not speak, however, and she went on, quickly and unsteadily:

"Of course you shall be repaid. Surely you must know that we could not allow this to pass. Can you not see that if we did not know you meant to be kind we should almost look on what you have done as an insult? Yes; it simply means that you are giving us money — making us a present of forty or fifty pounds."

"And supposing I am," said John speaking very softly, and suddenly taking her hand. "Supposing I am, Margot; what does it matter? Since I want to give you all I have and

myself with it. My sweet, I am not good enough to be your husband, but I want you to take me."

If she had been pale before, she became deadly white now; for a moment he thought she was going to faint. She stretched out her free hand and supported herself by leaning on the mantle-piece; she would have withdrawn the other but that he held it fast.

"I have taken you by surprise," he went on eagerly. "I think I am taken by surprise myself. I did not know what was coming. And yet, Margot, we might have guessed! We have been drifting closer and closer to each other all these weeks, and now the time has come when we cannot do without each other. I know I cannot do without you, and I think, my darling, you cannot do without me. Why, how frightened you look! Is there anything so very terrible in the knowledge that I love you, Margot? And will you not be candid and own that you love me, too; for indeed I am quite sure you do."

It was very characteristic of John Croft to do his wooing in this simple and straightforward fashion; to go straight to the end without paus-

ing to consider whether his manner of procedure were altogether wise or politic. It was a little rash to show so plainly his security of Margot's affection, his conviction that she was already his. Indeed, no woman cares to own herself easily won, and Margot, above all, naturally reticent, and hampered moreover by inherited notions of maidenly reserve and decorum, might well have taken offence at his confident tone. Yet, perhaps, after all, Sir John had done well in following his instinct; all unprepared to meet this sudden attack she was the less likely to withstand it. So overwhelmed was she, indeed, by the complex emotions called forth by his words that for the moment she could neither move nor speak.

"Ah, my little Margot," cried John, "do not look so terrified — there is nothing to be afraid of. I will never let trouble or anxiety come near you again. You have had more than your share already, but now it is all over."

Raising her eyes and seeing his handsome, kindling face bending over her, all alight with joy and triumph, she too was conscious of a sudden rush of joy, incredulous and uneasy, it is true, but overmastering. His face came

closer still; he would have kissed her — but, with a little startled cry, she broke from him.

"Oh no," she cried; "no, no — we are mad! It would be quite impossible."

She dropped into the nearest chair and covered her face with her hands. Croft, not in the least disconcerted, advanced a step or two and stood beside her.

"If we are mad," he remarked, "it is a very pleasant thing to be a lunatic. I, for one, never want to be sane again. My little Margot, you have had such a hard life of it that you imagine it must be madness to dream of being happy. But we are going to be happy, for all that, you and I together — you and I, Margot. Do you not think I could make you happy, love?"

He was bending over her now, and gently drawing down her hands; the fascination of his gaze attracted hers and held it.

"You do love me, Margot?" he urged.

His ardour almost infected her; he read in her eyes that she loved him only too well; in another moment she would have uttered the words he desired to hear; but, rousing herself with an effort, she forced them back. Sitting upright

and drawing away her hands, she said, instead, with all the firmness she could muster:

"I cannot be your wife, Sir John. It is like you to forget all that makes our union impossible; but I remember."

"What do you remember?" he cried impatiently. "Margot, you are not going to talk nonsense. There can be no question of trivialities between you and me."

A faint colour rose to Margot's cheeks. "I know I am not your equal," she said a little proudly. "I was not going to say anything about that, though I dare say many people would think the difference in our positions a very great obstacle to our union. Indeed, if no other existed, I think it would be dishonourable in me to allow you for my sake to take such a rash step — a step of which you might afterwards repent."

The expression of his face warned her that she must not pursue that topic further, and she paused, continuing presently, however, timidly: "And you know, Sir John, there is Valérie."

"I have not forgotten Valérie," said Croft gravely. "I think you can trust me to be a good brother to her. She shall share our home

until she marries, which she will probably do very soon," he added with a smile.

He was fond of Valérie, and took a most sincere and already brotherly interest in her prospects. Nevertheless, it would be very sweet to have Margot one day entirely to himself. Margot's quick ears detected a hint of longing in his tone, and she now spoke decidedly, even a little bitterly.

"And naturally you would be glad to be rid of her. Ah, no, Sir John, this will not do! I have sworn to devote myself to Valérie as long as she wants me, and I think she will want me always. You see for yourself she is not like other people. She has to be watched over and guided, and I must be free to look after her. Then there is her art; she must have full scope for her vocation, and I must be always at hand. You are very, very good; but I cannot marry you. It would not be fair either to you or to her. I could not do my duty to you both."

"And I, of course, must go to the wall," put in Sir John.

"Ah," cried Margot, looking up quickly through gathering tears, for she could not endure this tone from him. "Ah, do not be

angry! No, indeed, you would not go to the wall. It is because I fear, because I know —"

She broke off suddenly. Sir John guessed the confession which had been trembling on her lips, and a softer expression overspread his face; but he gave no other indication of emotion, and went on, steadily and quietly: "I think you are alarming yourself unnecessarily. There need be no clashing of wills."

"Ah, but you do not understand how in every trifling matter they must, and would, clash," interrupted Margot. "Take one small instance. When Valérie played in public, you probably would not wish me to play her accompaniments?"

Sir John suddenly laughed, and paused a moment before replying; then he said, in the frank, ingenuous way which she had always found so attractive: "Margot, there are some men who would no doubt promise anything in order to gain their heart's desire, but I — well, I'm a poor sort of fellow in many ways, but if I am poor I am honest! I will tell you candidly that I should not like you to play in public once you belonged to me."

In spite of the renewed lightness of his tone,

Margot felt that a steady resolution underlay his words, and knew that, love her as tenderly and ardently as he might, there were some points on which he was not disposed to give way to her. She had so often taken the lead in her intercourse with him, and had been so long accustomed to see him swayed by her influence, that the discovery of this new side to his character gave her quite a little shock. There was even a note of resentment in her voice as she said quickly: "I should also belong to Valérie!"

Sir John looked down at her with a flash in his eyes.

"Come, Margot," he said, "you must not trifle with me! I honour your affection for Valérie, and would never try to lessen it. I think you know me well enough to trust me. As my wife you would be able to do more for Valérie than you have ever done before. But sisterly affection is one thing and the love between husband and wife another. If you love me as I love you I must come first."

"Oh, no!" cried Margot quickly, frightened by a growing sense of her own weakness and of his power over her, "no, no, it cannot be! Valérie must come first! She always has been first."

Croft stood looking at her a moment in silence, and then said, throwing back his head with a little proud movement:

"Perhaps you are right, Margot, it is better for us to part, for I will not be content with the second place. I love you too well."

He lingered still, gazing at her as though to give her an opportunity for a word which might yet bring them together; but she set her lips, and looked back, proud and firm as he himself. Even at the moment when she had seemed about to yield to him, she had not appeared so fair and sweet as now that he was on the point of losing her. His face changed.

"Margot," he pleaded, "why should we spoil our lives when we might be so happy together?"

He spoke almost with a cry, and her heart echoed his words; but she only repeated steadily: "I will not desert Valérie."

"Then good-bye," said Sir John.

"I hope you will forget me," said Margot, faltering all at once.

He gave a short, angry laugh, and walked to the door without another word or glance.

Margot turned round. Even yet she might

recall him. But for what? What could she say, after all, how could she make things right between them? He would not yield, nor could she.

In another moment the door closed behind him, and his quick, decided footsteps sounded on the stairs. Margot remained staring vacantly before her, scarcely able to realise what had taken place. John Croft loved her, and had come to tell her so, and to ask her to be his wife. His wife — John Croft's wife! — and she had refused!

The house door closed with a bang, and hasty footfalls were heard in the street below. It was all over, all over; she would never look upon his face again.

XIV

ANDANTE CON VARIAZIONE

IT was perhaps as well for Margot that just at this time her mind should have been much absorbed in anxiety about her sister; thus the sadness which would otherwise have taken possession of her was in a measure diverted. Valérie, since the concert, had been sunk in the profoundest dejection. She scarcely ate; she slept badly; she would not speak, and repelled all attempts at consolation. "Leave me alone," she would cry. "Do you not think I know as well as you do how the affair stands? This time our failure has been irrevocable."

So Margot watched and prayed, and was very gentle and patient, and hid away her own sad thoughts; and little Valérie sat all day staring at the fire with great gloomy eyes.

One day, however, Margot, coming upstairs after a weary afternoon's work, found her pacing up and down the little drawing-room, taking

steps as long as her short limbs would allow of, her hands clasped behind her, and her face wearing a serious, not to say tragic, air.

"You have come!" she exclaimed, pausing opposite Margot. "I am glad of it. I have taken a resolve of which I must tell you."

Margot put her arm round the slight figure with a smile.

"And what is this weighty resolution?" she asked.

"Ah, it is nothing to laugh at. Margot, I begin to think I have dreamed my life away till now. All that we planned, all that we hoped, what has it come to? It is time for me to wake up and see things as they are. I am not meant to succeed as a musician; I must put away that dream as I have put away my violin. Do you know, Margot, I have locked it up? It is hidden quite away in the bottom of my big trunk upstairs. When I put it there I felt as if I were laying it in a coffin. It is dead, quite dead, and we will never speak of it again."

"Oh, my Valérie," cried Margot with a laugh that was half a sob, "do not be so tragic! Your Cremona would not die so easily — it will live again for you and for many."

"No, it is dead, I tell you, and buried. We will not speak of it again. I am going to be serious — to face the grim realities of life. Why should I let you do all the work and bear all the ennuis? I, too, will take my share. Henceforth I will work for my living."

"And what will you do, my poor little one?" asked Margot, still smiling with tender indulgence, though tears were in her eyes.

"I have been thinking — there is not much I can do, is there? I could not teach, because I have no patience. I should go mad if I were to spend the day like you in the company of those stupid children. I should rap their clumsy hands when they played false notes. And I do not know how to sew — so I thought I would paint — Christmas cards, you know, and Easter cards. It is a good time to begin, as Easter is now soon here."

"But, my dear child," began Margot.

Valérie interrupted her: "Hush, let me speak, I have thought it all out. People want cards perpetually; Christmas cards, and Easter cards, at the proper times, and birthday cards all the year round. Well, you know how much they charge for handpainted cards in the shops — a

shilling, and one and sixpence, and sometimes more. Naturally those cards have to be painted by someone, and that someone has to be paid for his or her trouble. Well, then, let us say that I paint three cards a day, earning on an average a shilling for each (for I should expect, of course, to be paid ninepence for the shilling ones, and one and threepence for the others). That would be three shillings a day — eighteen shillings a week — an income at once, you observe. Now, is it not well imagined?"

She was actually smiling now; her little face was quite bright. But Margot felt an odd inclination to cry, rather than to laugh.

"Say, then, is it not a good plan?" urged Valérie.

Margot kissed her many times, very lovingly, and at last found her voice.

"It is indeed a good plan, an excellent plan; the only drawback, my poor child, is that you do not know how to paint. You have never had a drawing-lesson in your life. How will you set about this undertaking?"

"It does not in the least signify my not having been taught to draw," returned Valérie loftily. "One does not want to know how to

draw to do those things. I will begin by tracing — I will copy and observe very closely, and after a time I shall get into the habit. Now, do not be discouraging. How am I to live if I do not do something?"

"Indeed, indeed, I did not mean to discourage you," cried Margot, quickly, for her sister's face was beginning to cloud over and tears of mortification were gathering in her eyes. "I was only wondering how you would manage. But of course these things are simple."

"Yes, that is just what I say — they are so simple that anyone could do them. You will buy me a nice little paint-box to-morrow, with little fine, fine brushes, and some tracing-paper, and some cards — I will begin with the ninepenny ones — and to-morrow afternoon I shall get to work."

She rubbed her hands and began to skip about the room in her old way. After all, Margot reflected, it would at least occupy her and distract her mind. Anything was better than that she should sit all day mute and miserable, with her small face growing smaller and smaller, and her big eyes bigger and bigger, each time that her sister looked at her. Let her

mess away by all means, with her cards and her colours; she would soon tire of them, but for a time the occupation would do her good.

Next day, therefore, Valérie set to work, and later in the afternoon Margot was called upon to admire her first production. It was a gelatine card which an hour's contact with Valérie's hot little fingers had caused to curl up at the corners. There was a brown cross in the middle, or rather leaning slightly to the right, and a white dove, with one wing sticking straight up and its tail very much cocked, perched on one side; on the other a wreath of forget-me-nots, each flower having six petals. Underneath Valérie had painted in pink letters the word "Resurgam."

"You see, you see, my first attempt! Do you not think I have succeeded very well? I composed it all myself. 'Resurgam,' you see, is appropriate for Easter — at least I think it is, but I am not quite sure what it means. The cross is not perfectly straight, but I do not think you notice it, as I have filled up the space with forget-me-nots. There, Margot, you said I could not draw! Well, I did those forget-me-nots entirely out of my head — even the

leaves! And my dove — is not my dove sweet?"

"It is, indeed, very sweet; but I do not quite understand why it has got a pink ribbon round its neck, and I don't think doves cock their tails like that. Did you draw this out of your head too!"

"No, I copied it from a robin, and painted it white — I thought it such a good idea — if a robin cocks its tail, why should n't a dove? I put the pink ribbon because I thought the picture wanted a little colour. Why are you looking at it like that?"

"I was only wondering why you have made one wing stick up — ought n't one to see the other wing too?"

Valérie began to gather her paints together, noisily and hurriedly. "Oh, of course, if you find fault with everything there is no use in my trying. I thought you would be so pleased, and considering I have never done anything like it before, I don't think it's at all bad."

"My darling, no, I am not finding fault," cried Margot hastily. "I think you are very clever to have done it so well, and it was stupid of me not to see what you meant. Of course

the dove is perching on the cross, is n't it? and that is why its wings are stretched out. The other wing is stretched out too, but we can't see it."

"You do not even like my pink ribbon," murmured Valérie still injured. "I had taken such pains with it, too. I tried to make the little bow at the back in the shape of a — a true lover's knot."

She was on the point of tears, so Margot did not dare to smile, though in truth the combination of ideas struck her as exceedingly comic. She kissed and soothed the little artist, and in the end had the satisfaction of seeing her set to work again, quite consoled, announcing that as this card was not altogether successful, she would perhaps let it go for sixpence.

" Poor love," said Margot to herself, " if she thinks she will ever induce anybody to buy those little horrors, I fear she will be disappointed! But perhaps she will grow tired of the amusement before she has done enough to offer for sale."

Valérie, however, had thrown herself into the new pursuit with characteristic enthusiasm. She toiled over her monstrosities with as much energy

as she had been wont to bestow on her practising. The fingers, so clever and deft, so delicate and light of touch when they handled string or bow, were, as we know, awkward and clumsy as any child's when they set about ordinary work. They were awkward and clumsy now, but Valérie, delighting in the bright colours and in the actual dabbling with brushes and water, was perfectly satisfied with her achievements. She went on drawing doves and crosses and flowers — the latter with entire disregard of all botanical rules; she tried to depict cracked eggs with downy chickens emerging from them — but was herself constrained to own that these were her least successful efforts — and any other emblem that she considered appropriate to the Paschal time, and was for a week or two absolutely happy. Margot grew anxious as the days passed and the Cremona was still entombed in the black box, and Valérie, instead of taking up her musical studies again, continued to pore over her Easter cards. She would soon get out of practice, the elder sister feared; in any case, she did not like to see Valérie neglect her true vocation for this whim. And was she not laying up for herself a fresh store of disappoint-

ments? Nobody would ever look seriously at these productions of hers. Margot felt herself blushing at the thought of offering them to any shop-proprietor.

At last, one morning, a week or two before Easter, Valérie announced that she had now completed two dozen cards, and proposed that they should set out to a certain stationer's in the High Street, Kensington, and endeavour to conclude a bargain.

"I am taking everything," she said. "There are twenty-four shillings' worth here really, but as the egg-and-chicken ones are not so well done as the others, I propose to let him have them all for a pound."

"How would it be if we left the egg-and-chicken ones behind?" suggested Margot, inwardly shuddering as she remembered those works of art.

"Oh, that would not do at all! How foolish you are! I shall not leave anything behind; twenty is such an odd number; besides, the man will think us very generous to let him have these four in."

Margot said no more, but set out with a sinking heart. Valérie, on the contrary, was in

high spirits, chattering gaily as they walked along, and planning the treats she meant to give her sister out of her earnings.

'It is nice to earn money of one's own, is it not? I feel so proud — so proud! It takes even you, Madame Margot, some time to earn a whole pound."

When they arrived at the establishment in question Valérie trotted up to the principal counter, and asked for the proprietor, with such a high and mighty air, that the gentleman hastened to await her pleasure. But when he found that the pretty creature who addressed him was not a great lady, bent on giving extensive orders, but a humble little would-be artist, requesting him to become the purchaser of a collection of almost childish daubs, he was absolutely speechless for a moment. When Valérie, not in the least abashed at his silence, proceeded to explain her views as to the average price which she intended to charge for her productions, adding graciously that she was willing, for this time, to throw three or four in, he laughed outright, and sweeping the cards together, handed them back to her with an ironical bow.

" They are not quite what we usually offer to

our customers. I think people would be rather astonished if we asked them to buy any of these. No, thank you, madam, we have no use for them."

Margot, blushing hotly, pulled her sister by the sleeve, and Valérie, after deliberately wrapping up her property, marched away, holding her head very high.

"It was a common shop, that," she cried when they reached the open air. "The man was very rude. I think he was angry because I asked more than he wanted to give. Let us try somewhere else."

"My dear," suggested Margot timidly, "do you know I fear it is useless. These men deal probably with their own people, and do not care to employ anyone else."

Valérie stopped short, whisking round so as to face her, ruffled and angry.

"It is nonsense what you say there. If that was so no one would ever get on. There must be a beginning to everything. Let us go to Regent Street, or Oxford Street, and try some of the really good shops; we shall be better treated than by those common people. See, there is the 'bus, let us take it."

Margot judged it better to let Valérie find out for herself how vain would be the result of her endeavours than to try and dissuade her, knowing from experience how obstinate she could be when she chose, and fearing to irritate her further by protests and objections which would in the end leave her unconvinced.

They began, therefore, a weary pilgrimage, which resulted in an intense disappointment on Valérie's part. Everywhere that she offered her poor little wares they were scorned or laughed at. She spoke not a word on their return from their fruitless wanderings, but when they once more found themselves at home, she spread out her twenty-four cards on the table, and looked at them for a long time very thoughtfully. At last, calling to Margot, she bade her draw near and look at them too.

"Do you find them very ugly — very badly done?" she asked wistfully. Her bright eyes were fixed searchingly on Margot's face. The latter was silent, vainly seeking for words which should not be too wounding, too discouraging. Valérie, seizing her by both arms, pinioned her firmly. "You must tell the truth; you must swear to speak the truth! Bah! your face

would tell me even if you tried to conceal what you thought. Margot, I see it in your eyes. You think those men were right; my cards are frightful, and no one would buy them."

"No, indeed," said Margot, eagerly; "I do not think your work bad at all, Valérie. But it is, perhaps, not quite what people usually sell. They have their own ways of doing them, you know, the people who are accustomed to paint such cards; you perhaps have not quite got into the method. Who knows, they may use different colours."

"I see, I see!" cried Valérie with a quivering lip. "I have made myself ridiculous in attempting what I knew nothing about? Why, indeed, should I attempt to do anything? Everything fails with me."

Gathering together all the cards with trembling fingers, she ran hastily across the room, and, before Margot could stop her, flung them into the fire. Then, dropping into an armchair, she cried as if her heart would break.

"I have a mind to burn my violin too!" she sobbed. "Oh, Margot, why cannot I die? I wish I could die! I am always trying and hoping, and never succeeding in anything."

"My dear," returned Margot, who had knelt down beside her and drawn the little rumpled brown head on to her shoulder, "you know we must not speak in the same breath of your art, your great talent, and these things! They served to pass the time. If you could have sold them you would have been pleased and proud; but, think, even if you sold all your pictures as fast as you could paint them, would they ever be to you a joy and a glory like your music?"

"Ah, my music! Do not speak of it! A joy and a glory you call it? Say rather my torture and despair. I think it will kill me — the longing to be heard and the maddening knowledge that no one wants to hear me."

"Have yet a little more patience, my darling," urged Margot, wiping away the tears that rolled down so fast. "After all, you are only eighteen. How few even great artists are recognised at eighteen? Be patient and persevere. Success will come to you; fame will come. Some time you and I will laugh as we look back on a day like to-day."

But Valérie only groaned, and Margot found it difficult to believe in her own cheery words.

For days afterwards Valérie crept about like a little ghost, looking so pale and heavy-eyed, and seeming so depressed and apathetic that at last Margot determined to rouse her at all costs.

"Do you know, Valérie," she said, approaching her one day, "I have just seen a placard advertising a recital to-morrow by a new pianist — Paul Waldenek. At least, he has never before played in England. He is a Hungarian, I believe; it would be interesting, would it not, to hear a fellow-countryman? They say he is very good. Shall we go and hear him?"

"No, I will not," returned Valérie moodily. "I do not ever want to hear any music again."

Margot said no more then, but when the sisters met again at dinner-time she handed Valérie a poster containing the programme of the morrow's recital, surmounted by the portrait of the performer. This represented a face still young, with fine, regular features, and large eyes. The hair was rather long, brushed back from the brow.

"Has he got white hair?" interrogated Valérie, examining the paper with interest; "or is it only that they have not shaded it?

It is a good head, Margot, and a nice face. I daresay he is very much flattered, but he looks as if he had something in him. Perhaps, after all, we might as well hear him — it is not as if he played the violin," she added with a sigh.

On the next day they therefore betook themselves to St. James's Hall, finding the street, as they drew near, blocked by carriages and cabs.

"There seems to be many people coming to hear this man," remarked Valérie pensively. "Think, Margot, how nice it would be if it were I that were going to play, and these crowds and crowds of people were waiting to receive me!"

Margot looked at her compassionately.

"Some day, my little one, some day, crowds will be waiting for you too. I am sure when Waldenek was eighteen he did not play to very large audiences."

She spoke, however, somewhat dejectedly, for she, too, was contrasting the brilliant success, which apparently awaited the pianist, with her sister's failure a short time before; and with the memory of that failure came other memories too, less bitter but perhaps more sad. Valérie's next words touched on the subject uppermost in her thoughts.

"When I last came here, Sir John Croft was with me. Poor Sir John! I wonder where he is now! We never hear of him."

As, at that moment, they approached the door of the concert-room it did not seem necessary for Margot to answer; and, once within the hall, Valérie's thoughts were diverted into other channels.

The hall was crowded from floor to ceiling; a certain breathless expectation controlling the mass of humanity so that it was almost still, until at length the great musician made his appearance, and then a sudden thunder of applause greeted him. Valérie sat bolt upright, her eyes dilated, her lips parted.

"Does his appearance please you?" began Margot smiling, but Valérie quickly raised a warning finger.

"Hush! He is going to begin!"

For a moment longer, however, Waldenek stood, bowing his acknowledgments. He was a tall, slight man, moving with a certain languid grace. The portrait, as Margot observed, had not flattered his features, and could not, of course, render the charm of the ivory-white complexion, which seemed to accentuate the dark-

ness of eyes and brows; the hair, light and fine as silk in texture, was snow-white, contrasting curiously with the vigorous frame and youthful face. The whole aspect of the man was so unusual, so picturesque, that at first it impressed the beholder curiously. He looked as though he had stepped out of an old picture; the head and cast of face, the very shape of the hands, were such as an eighteenth-century artist would have loved to depict. As he turned to approach the piano, Margot involuntarily glanced to see if that fine white hair of his were not fastened at the back with a bow of ribbon. In another moment the first notes broke the deathlike stillness which had succeeded the outburst of enthusiasm, and the whole of that vast audience listened as one man.

Margot was so carried out of herself that she forgot even Valérie, and remained in a trance of delight until the wonderful fingers dropped from the keys and the artist paused. Then she looked at her sister.

"Valérie," she whispered, "did you ever hear anything so beautiful? Did you ever even guess that the piano could be played like this? Oh, he is a great man; he is Master!"

Valérie put up her hand hastily.

"Do not speak to me," she returned quickly, "you disturb me. Oh, those stupid people! —why do they not stop clapping, so that he can play again!"

Not another word did she speak during the two hours that succeeded; she only seemed to wake when the player was recalled, and then she beat her little hands and struck her feet frantically on the floor, that she might add her mite of entreaty to the supplications of the multitude. The great man evidently felt himself to be in touch with this appreciative audience, which displayed for him an ardour and enthusiasm seldom bestowed by London concert-goers on the musicians who cater for their entertainment. The player was in sympathy with his hearers; their delight called forth a ready response. He played again and again, though he became at last so exhausted that he staggered as he rose to express his gratitude to the frantic ovation which greeted the third encore of the last item on the programme — a delicate, exquisite Nocturne of his own composition. Finally, by order of the Impresario, the piano itself was carried off the stage, lest this clamor-

ous, insatiable throng might unduly overtax the strength of their idol. As he stood bowing and smiling before withdrawing, there was a rush towards him: people clambered on to the stage to clasp his hands; pretty women, with faces still wet with tears, leaned forward, murmuring broken words of admiration. Never had such a sight been beheld in that place.

Margot had not believed that in this cold, unimpressionable England such enthusiasm was possible. She looked at Valérie, and was startled to see how white she was. Her face had a strange, fixed expression; she looked almost as though she were going to faint.

"Come away, darling — come. I should not have brought you here; it has been too much for you. My poor little love, I might have known the sight of this man's tremendous success would make you feel — "

"Oh, no," interrupted Valérie, with a little gasp. "No, it is not that; you do not understand. No, do not take me away yet — not while he is there."

In another moment, however, Waldenek had disappeared, and the audience had begun to disperse. Margot led away Valérie, who was

trembling so violently that, when they emerged into the street, Margot thought it better to take a cab and drive straight home, instead of waiting for the omnibus, which was their usual conveyance.

When the door was closed and they were driving homewards, Valérie turned suddenly to her sister.

"Oh Margot!" she cried; "oh, malheur! Do you not see what has happened? I have met my fate! I love Waldenek, and he will never love me!"

XV

APPASSIONATO SUBITO

PERHAPS of all the many troubles and vicissitudes which had fallen to Margot's lot during her career as duenna to her sister, this was the most serious and fraught with the most anxiety. She had at first tried to treat the matter as a whim, a passing fancy, to which it was not worth while to attach importance; but Valérie was for her part so entirely in earnest, so distractingly convinced of the depth and reality of her sudden passion for Waldenek, that Margot was at her wits' end to know how to deal with her.

"I always told you," Valérie would say, looking at her earnestly and despairingly, "that I never could love anyone whom I did not feel to be my master — one who was not greater than I. The moment I beheld this man I felt the power of his genius; and when I heard him play — oh! Margot, Margot, what shall I do?

I feel that he is the only man I can ever love, and you know how hopeless it is for me to love him. I shall never know him; once, indeed, I might have dreamed that I too would be celebrated — that he would at least hear of my name — that one day we might even meet on equal terms. But what am I? A poor, obscure, disappointed girl, who can do nothing with her life, — who will live and die unknown."

Margot at first tried a little gentle mockery as a means of awakening her sister to the absurdity of her present craze; then she grew severe.

"Valérie, it is not like you to be unmaidenly. It is wrong to allow yourself to think in such a way of a man whom you have only seen once, with whom you have never even spoken. How do you know what he is really like? He may be very bad; many of these great artists lead wicked lives. He is, perhaps, in every way unworthy of your regard."

"Bad! Unworthy!" repeated Valérie, scornfully. "Where are your eyes, Margot!" Then she added, inconsequently, "bad or good, he is my fate! I love him, and shall never love anyone else."



"Hush, child — hush! I cannot bear to hear you. What has come to you — to you, who were always so refined and delicate in your ideas? To me it seems a dreadful thing to acknowledge such feelings when — when there is absolutely no ground for them. I, myself, cannot understand a woman loving who is not, herself, loved first; or, at least," correcting herself hastily, while a vivid blush overspread her face, "how, if such a misfortune were to happen to a girl, she could speak of it, own it so calmly, even to herself."

"You are you, and I am I," retorted Valérie, doggedly. "I will not speak of it, since the idea disgusts you; I will keep it to myself; but it will be there; it will always be there. It is cruel of you to talk of its being unmaidenly; I cannot help my nature. The sunflower cannot help turning to the sun. He is my sun, and my heart and my thoughts will follow him wherever he goes."

Margot groaned, and wrung her hands; "Valérie, Valérie, you know I like to have all your confidence; if it is there you must tell me of it; but, ma mignonne, do try to be sensible. This thing is impossible: can you not make an

effort to fight against it, to put it out of your mind? After all, supposing you were to hear that Waldenek was a married man?"

"He is not," interrupted Valérie, savagely.

"But, if he were? You would then be obliged to cease thinking of him."

"If he were! — if he were! He is not, I tell you; and, even if he were, what does it matter? It would make no difference. He will never know, in any case; and I could not answer for my thoughts. Ah! how scandalised you are! There, I will speak of it no more to you; I will only speak of it to my Cremona. Ah, my Cremona!—my faithful friend, thou at least wilt understand and sympathise."

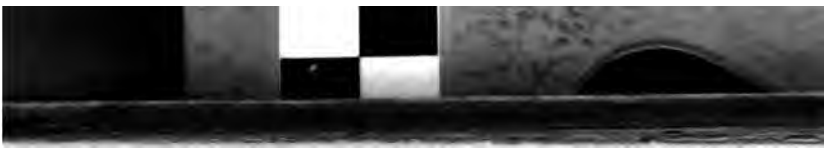
She flew out of the room with burning cheeks, and presently returned, bearing the exhumed violin tenderly in her arms; then she began to play. Irritated and anxious though Margot was, she could not help being thrilled by unwilling admiration as she listened. One by one each item of Waldenek's programme was reproduced by Valérie. When she came to his own compositions she threw into her rendering of them such tenderness and yearning passion that tears rushed to Margot's eyes.

"Ah, Valérie, you are a great artist! You are a genius! Why cannot the world hear you? If you could take your proper place, these idle fancies would leave you."

"Listen! listen!" cried Valérie, her face alight and eager, her eyes shining like stars; "listen, did it not go so? Ah, how beautiful it is! His fingers were wonderful; but my Cremona can say more than any piano. Listen! Do you not hear his soul crying, longing for something that is withheld? Margot, something is wanting to him too. Great as he is, his life is not complete; he wants something—he wants *me*."

"Valérie, you are going mad!" gasped Margot.

"No, it is true: my Cremona has told me; you can hear it for yourself. Is not his music more beautiful when I play it? Ah, if we could play together! Margot, Margot, if we could play together — if we could be together always? Do you not see how my art would complete his? My life would make his perfect; my love would fill up that void in his heart of which his music speaks. Oh, Margot! why can we not meet?"



The hand which held the bow dropped, and her head fell forward on her bosom. All Margot's irritation left her; she was unspeakably alarmed. Were the child's delicate artistic brain and highly strung nervous organisation giving way under the pressure of this sudden fierce excitement, coming as it did after long continued strain and disappointment? What was to be done? What steps could she take to avert this threatened calamity?

After much persuasion she induced Valérie to lay aside her violin and lie down; but she was conscious, while she moved about the room, watering her plants and rearranging the shabby furniture, talking meanwhile of every subject which she could conceive likely to distract Valérie's thoughts, that those large glowing eyes were gazing at her too absently, and that the mind of her sister was centred on the one engrossing subject.

At early dawn next day Margot woke with a start; Valérie's form was absent from her side. Jumping up hastily, she ran to the door, and on opening it caught the faint sounds of a violin coming from the room below. Running downstairs to the little drawing-room, which

looked very ghostly in the grey light, she found Valérie standing, an unreal, ethereal little white-robed figure, playing Waldenek's Nocturne. With loving entreaty she lured her back to bed; and though the little shivering form soon grew warm again, and by-and-by Valérie actually slept, Margot lay wakeful and miserable till the usual hour for rising came.

As the days passed, Margot's uneasiness increased rather than diminished. Valérie was, it is true, less excited than at first, and not altogether so unreasonable; but it was evident that her thoughts were still absorbed in this new passion, or fancied passion. She bought not only the pieces which she had heard Waldenek play, but every one of his published compositions. Few of these were intended for the violin, but she made renderings of her own; taking his themes, she wove them into beautiful quaint fantasias. It seemed to Margot that she had never realised before the wonderful gift of the little creature; and yet it was anguish to her to listen to the strange, sad music which filled the house all day long; it seemed to her that through it all she could hear the heart of her sister wailing and yearning for that which it would never obtain.

So the weeks wore away, and March came and went, and April, full of promise and suggestion, even in smoke-begrimed London. The parks were ablaze with delicate spring bloom; the glow of the almond trees lit up faint exquisite fires along the garden paths; little crisp, curled baby-leaves stretched themselves out of their sticky brown cradles; above the smoke of the city the sky was delicately, ethereally blue; and one day Valérie took to her bed.

On endeavouring to rise that morning, she had fainted; and now she lay, with her small face nearly as white as the pillow; all the vitality that was left to her seeming to be centred in her feverishly bright eyes.

Margot was terrified; it seemed to her that Valérie must be going to die. Valérie was of the same opinion herself, and announced the fact with absolute certainty.

"There is nothing to live for," she said. "I should be rather glad to die, if it were not for you, Margot."

But when the doctor came he scouted the notion. It was a clear case of nervous exhaustion, he said; the girl had been working too hard, perhaps; she had evidently over-taxed



her strength. Was there anything preying on her mind? What she needed was absolute rest, plenty of milk, fresh air, and change of scene. If it were possible to take her away her recovery would be much more rapid. Did Mademoiselle Kostolitz know Wiesbaden? He would recommend Wiesbaden. It was an excellent place for people suffering from nerves, and not — looking hastily round the poor little room — not at all expensive. Would it be possible to take Mademoiselle Valérie to Wiesbaden?

"Anything would be possible that is desirable for my sister's health," said Margot.

"Well, then, take her away to Wiesbaden next week if you can. Let me see; this is the beginning of May — keep her there for the summer if you can manage it, and when you bring her back she will be quite herself again. Wiesbaden is beautiful at this time of the year. Keep her up on the high ground among the woods, on the hills; let her drink as much milk as ever she can, and live in the open air, and she will be quite robust by the time autumn comes."

He went away, much pleased with the programme he had drawn out, and not guessing

that it would be a little difficult to put into execution. When the door closed behind him Valérie wriggled impatiently under the bed-clothes.

"I don't want to go to Wiesbaden," she remarked; "I am sure it is a stupid, tiresome place. I would much rather die and go to Heaven."

"I could not spare you, you see," returned Margot, stooping down and kissing her; "and you are not nearly ready for Heaven yet—do not flatter yourself. You are much too naughty! Saint Peter would shut the door in your face."

So intense was Margot's relief at finding that her sister was not dangerously ill, that she was ready to laugh at anything. Even the problem of ways and means did not appal her, though somewhat complex in view of the long journey, and enforced residence for three months, at least, in a strange place, where she would be spending instead of earning money.

"It is all very fine," pursued Valérie. "How are we going to get there; and how are we going to live when we do get there?"

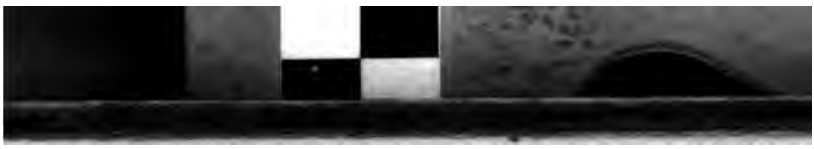
"Let us get there first," returned Margot



gaily; "then we will see. Do not be afraid; I will manage it somehow."

By-and-by, however, when she was alone, she thought over the matter in a more serious spirit. The undertaking was a grave one. She would have to give up her lessons in London, of course, and might in consequence lose her pupils, and find herself without any reliable means of livelihood on her return. Well, she must chance that; she had made a beginning before, and must make one again, trusting to be favoured by fortune. The actual means at her disposal were small, unless she availed herself of her reserve fund in the savings bank. This, since Valérie's unlucky concert, she had always considered to belong rightfully to Sir John Croft. The sum realised by the sale of tickets had been sufficient, as he had calculated, to pay all expenses; but Margot had persistently looked on this money as rather a gift from Sir John than the legitimate result of her sister's labours.

Some day she meant to repay him — later on, when the memory of what had passed between them should be less fresh. She had meant to draw out her savings only when the



time came to refund Croft. But now, in this sudden, urgent necessity, the thought came to her that after all they were hers, to make use of as she chose. Sir John's quixotic plan had been conceived and carried out solely in the single-minded desire to help them. How wounded he would be now, could he know that Margot, in her distress, refused to avail herself of the means actually at her command because he had indirect claims on them! After all, there would be nothing dishonourable, nothing ignoble about the act, since, if she had chosen, she could have been mistress of all he had. If he had been a little less guileless, a little more prudent in carrying out his plan, she need never have known that he was the sole purchaser of the tickets in question. He had meant so kindly, he was so generous; why should she not be generous too?

"I will do it!" said Margot to herself with burning cheeks. "Oh, my friend! you are good and kind; but I do not like to use money which belongs to you. Nevertheless, I will put my pride in my pocket and do it."

Then and there she began a letter to Sir John. She felt she could not take this step

without his knowledge, since in so doing she was breaking a resolution of which he had been aware.

"My dear Sir John," she wrote; "you remember when we parted I told you I must pay you back the money you expended on those tickets. The only reason I did not at once return it to you was because I feared you would think me unkind and ungracious, and be hurt. But I always meant to do it, and was only putting off until you had — what shall I say? — forgotten me, or remembered without pain the episode in your life of which I was a part. I know you so well, my dear friend, that I scarcely think such can be the case yet; but I earnestly pray that it may come to pass; and, indeed, I am quite sure that by-and-by you will find out that there is nothing at all wonderful about me, and that it must have been your own kindness of heart which made you think so highly of me. But now I want to tell you that I am going, after all, to use the money I owe you. I want it, and so I am going to take it. Valérie is ill, and has been ordered abroad. You know yourself that this will entail many expenses; therefore I am going to avail myself of your help. I

know that you will not misconstrue my motives, or despise me for changing my mind. You know me well enough to understand that I do not like doing it; but for Valérie's sake it shall be done, and I think it right that you should know of it. Now, this letter does not need an answer; I ask you not to answer it. It is far better for us not to hear of each other; and I should not have written to you but that I felt I was bound to let you know I had retracted my resolution. Believe me, dear Sir John, yours sincerely, Margot Kostolitz."

She did not venture to read over this letter, but despatched it hastily. She had forbidden Sir John to send a reply, and yet perhaps she expected one. For the next few days she started and coloured whenever she heard the postman knock; but no letter came, and she was unreasonable enough to feel a sinking of the heart. It would have been kind if he had sent a line just to ask about Valérie. She wished now that she had not written so lengthily, perhaps so effusively; above all, that she had left out that sentence about thinking he had not yet forgotten her. Of course he had forgotten her; it was very evident he had, and her entreaty that

he would refrain from answering her letter was altogether superfluous. The little episode to which she had alluded was over and done with; it had passed completely out of his life. If even the memory of it remained, it had probably caused him shame and annoyance.

XVI

PASTORALE

THE spring was far advanced when the Kostolitzes found themselves established at Wiesbaden. Following the doctor's advice, they took rooms at the higher end of the town, near the beautiful wooded heights of the Neroberg, then in its full glory of delicate green leafage. Their rooms were pretty and quaint, on the ground floor of one of the pensions so numerous in that locality; the sitting-room in particular, though very tiny, had great charms for the sisters, for it possessed a bow-window looking out on the Nerothal and up towards the woods; and in this bow-window was just space enough for a small table and two chairs. There they took their coffee and rolls in the mornings, giving largesse afterwards to the multitudes of birds, which, tame and expectant from long indulgence, fluttered perpetually round the window-sills. Never,



surely, was such a place for birds as Wiesbaden. Everybody feeds them; after each meal one sees the ledges of all the windows white with crumbs; they flutter almost under one's feet in the streets, barely taking the trouble to hop out of the way when a cart or carriage passes by.

In the Kostolitzes' sitting-room there was also a space for a piano, and what more, as Valérie asked, could anyone want? The change and excitement of the journey had to a certain extent diverted her mind and raised her spirits; sometimes she laughed and chattered almost like her old self. Margot carried out the doctor's injunctions in the whole-hearted way which was characteristic of her: she pursued Valérie with tumblers of milk, and stood over her with a threatening and determined face until she drank them; she drove her out of doors; once she even went so far as to lock up the Cremona, whereupon Valérie sat down on the floor and declared that she would not eat, drink, sleep, or go out until her treasure was restored to her. Margot was in consequence forced to give in, but noted with satisfaction that though her sister played constantly,

and played, moreover, for the most part Waldenek's music, she was more calm over it than heretofore; she did not play at unseasonable times, nor throw quite so much passion into the performance. Margot hoped that she was beginning to forget, but Valérie was far from forgetting. When she wandered along the green alleys of the Nerothal, or when in the warmer weather she lay outstretched on the sunlit, mossy sod, inhaling the spicy odour of the larches, and gazing upwards through their feathery, ethereal green at the blue overhead, or when she sat in the Kursaal garden listening to the orchestra, one face was ever before her, one thought absorbed heart and mind. Through the really charming music, which she was ostensibly enjoying, she heard the sounds of other music; she listened to the strains which seemed to call her soul.

Nevertheless, fresh air, sunshine, change of scene, and the beautiful creamy milk were doing their work; little Valérie was regaining her rounded contours, her small hands were growing plump again, the colour was coming back to her face; in spite of her dreams and longings it became evident, even to Margot's

anxious eyes, that Valérie was not going to die of love.

Meanwhile, Margot had, as usual, found work to do; she had managed to pick up a few pupils, and was busy, and, in a manner, happy. She, too, was enjoying the rest and the complete change; the relief, moreover, at finding that her sister's ill-health but transitory was in itself so great as to be almost joy. She dreamed no dreams, even when she had time to sit with Valérie in the greenwood; no dreams, at least that were deserving of the name; for surely if one dream, one must also hope, and no hope entered into these reveries. They chiefly were concerned with the past; she lived over again certain brief, sweet moments, but found that when thus rehearsed there was a poignant sadness even in the sweetness that made her sometimes wish she could banish them beyond recall. Sometimes, too, on very bright, golden days, when the birds were singing and the woodland flowers were at their sweetest, she would begin to wonder what it would be like to see and feel such things in the company of *Somebody*. Other girls were allowed to know what such happiness might be; they were free to own



their love, and to accept that which was offered to them. It was curious to think that such happiness was possible in life. Margot had always found life so hard, so stern. Anything which had appeared to her pleasant, she had known from the outset to be forbidden to her; that for which she longed might be given to others but never to her. The cares of life were hers in abundance — toil, anxiety; but of life's sweets, what did she know? Only that they were sweet, and that she must never hope to taste them. Some day John Croft would find a woman whom he would love as he had loved her — more than he had loved her. His fancy for her had been a transitory thing; already, as his silence proved, he had forgotten her. And this woman — this happy woman — would be free to tell him that his love was returned; and they would marry and be always together. They would wander together, perhaps, in woods like these, and every beautiful thing would seem more beautiful because of the sympathy between them; he would look at her as he used to look at Margot, only more tenderly, because she, the wife, might venture to look at him in return and let the love in her heart show itself



in her eyes; he would say to her some of those sweet things which Margot had so often seen trembling on his lips and had not suffered him to speak. His wife could, without fear or hesitation, respond — avow. Here a sob would rise in Margot's throat, and she would sometimes turn over on the mossy sward, pillowing her face on her folded arms, so that Valérie thought she was asleep, and did not guess that her tears were dripping into the warm, kind earth, in whose broad bosom alone, as she told herself sadly, would her unquiet heart find rest.

When August came an event occurred which upset the peaceful tenor of the sisters' lives: Waldenek suddenly appeared at Wiesbaden. One morning when they were indulging, as they occasionally did, in a tour of inspection of the fascinating shops in the Wilhelmstrasse, Margot suddenly felt Valérie clutch her arm.

"Look there!" she cried in a choked voice.

A large placard had caught her eye, which announced that the celebrated pianist, Waldenek, was passing through Wiesbaden on his way to Frankfort and Vienna, and had been persuaded to give one concert at the Kursaal on the following Wednesday.

How Margot conveyed Valérie home she could not afterwards imagine; and to get through the days which intervened till the evening of the concert arrived was still more difficult. It is needless to say that Valérie insisted on going to the concert, and on engaging the best places attainable. This was one of the occasions on which her sister knew it would be useless to attempt opposition. The evening came, and they walked together in the warm, scented twilight to the Kursaal, which somewhat prosaic structure assumed a certain fairylike appearance as thus seen, its twinkling lights flashing out from beneath the shadowy branches of the surrounding trees. As they passed through the gardens the dreamy plash of the fountains fell musically upon their ears, and a thrush piped overhead.

"Margot, this is Fairyland!" said Valérie. "Let us make haste, the Prince is waiting!"

If the exterior of the Kursaal had at that hour a certain poetry of aspect, the interior was assuredly commonplace enough. The concert-room was crammed to overflowing with a typical German audience — businesslike, critical, and music-loving, each and all, from the

sturdy old gentleman who, while waiting for the pianist to make his appearance, discoursed eloquently of lager beer, to the pretty girl whose blue eyes roved so frequently to the doorway, where an array of gallant Uhlans had taken up their position.

When Waldenek made his appearance, Margot scarcely dared to glance at her sister; and throughout the performance, though Waldenek surpassed himself, and under any other circumstances her artistic delight would have been unbounded, her anxiety marred her enjoyment. The applause at the end, if less enthusiastic than the ovation which Waldenek had received in London, nevertheless appeared to satisfy him; doubtless the artist knew the temper of those he had to deal with, and felt the sincerity of their approval. On being recalled for the last time he smiled as he bowed his acknowledgments.

"Margot, he smiles!" murmured Valérie in her sister's ear. "Oh, Margot, he smiles! Oh, if he would smile for me!"

"Come away, child; come away," cried Margot, hastily buttoning her sister's wrap, and then imperatively forcing her to her feet

and drawing her towards the door. There was luckily a general move at the same time, and the sisters were carried onward and out into the sweet night air. When at length they had escaped from the press Valérie broke from her sister, and hurried on a few paces to a bench under the trees, upon which she threw herself.

"Do not let us go in yet," she cried. "Oh, Margot, look at the stars in that deep blue sky. Can you not smell the flowers? Oh, Margot, what a world! Oh, that music! I think I am going mad. It is delightful to go mad like this. Heavens! what a night! Margot, Margot, I am happy: I have heard his music — I have seen him smile! Perhaps if we stay here he may pass by."

Margot thereupon wisely resolved not to stay there a moment longer, and swiftly drawing the trembling arm through hers, with much difficulty persuaded Valérie to go home. Valérie continued in the same condition of violent excitement for some hours, but at last was induced to go to bed, falling, after many feverish twists and turns, into a troubled sleep.

She woke early and looked cautiously at Margot, whose anxiety had kept her long awake,

but who was now in a deep slumber. Valérie rose and dressed, noiselessly stealing into the adjoining room, and softly closing the door of communication. The window at the further end was unshuttered, and a flood of sunlight was pouring into the room. It was still so early that no one in the house was astir, indeed the whole town — as much of it, at least, as Valérie could see — was wrapped in slumber. The birds were twittering, it is true, in the boughs beside her window, beginning to wake up to the business of the day, but their drowsy chirps and flutterings served but to accentuate the prevailing stillness.

The external quiet of nature roused a kind of frenzied impatience in Valérie. She was not quiet; the blood was leaping in her veins; she felt a passionate need of movement, of action; she wanted above all to play, to give expression to this strange tumult, this wholly unreasonable joy, which since last night had taken possession of her. How could this stupid, lazy world sleep on this beautiful summer's morning, when the mere fact of living was intoxicating? How should she have patience to wait till the dull town woke up to

its daily humdrum cares? Margot had warned her that she would give scandal and offence if she played, as she was wont to play at home, at any time the fancy took her; the other lodgers would be annoyed, she insisted, if Valérie performed a fantasia after midnight, for instance, or in the very early morning. Valérie sat down on the window-sill, drumming, with unquiet, impatient fingers, on the panes. Was it not so the Rêverie went? She could remember it note by note, his Rêverie, the voice of his heart. All night little strands of that music had run in and out of her fitful dreams, weaving themselves therein like golden threads. It was the voice of his heart calling to hers. . . . Her fingers dropped suddenly into her lap, and she leaned out of the window, holding her breath. Hark! What was that? In the distance, echoing through the silent street, she heard a footstep — a man's footstep — measured and firm.

As she listened the colour swept over her face; her heart began to throb so violently that it almost drowned the sounds for which she was straining her ears. In that hushed, expectant moment it seemed to her that the

world was waiting; she, too, was waiting, and as the step came nearer and nearer, she felt that it would not be in vain. By what coincidence it came to pass I know not — whether some odd "brain wave" or intuition warned her of Waldenek's approach — certain it is that it was he himself who presently came into sight, walking along dreamily, evidently rejoicing in the absolute freedom and security of the early morning. He carried his hat in his hand, and his fine head was a little thrown back, the morning breeze lifting the silky, silvery hair from his temples.

Valérie sat absolutely still while he passed, watching his figure until it disappeared under the trees of the boulevard leading to the Neroberg. Then she sprang to her feet, a sudden mad purpose taking possession of her. She would follow Waldenek to the woods, and there, alone with him in that green, silent world, she would play for him.

She quickly drew her violin from its case, and without heeding the fact that she was bare-headed, stole swiftly and noiselessly from the room, unbarred the front door, and let herself out of the house. Flitting across the

street, she soon found herself on Waldenek's track. There was his figure, a little way ahead. Valérie slackened her pace, keeping him well in sight, but not allowing herself to gain upon him. Now he was beginning to mount the incline which led to the heart of the woods. Valérie followed, walking very lightly, and lifting her skirts lest a rustle might betray her. She could hear his steady, even steps fall rhythmically on the little path, and now and then a dry stick snap beneath his foot; but louder than all in Valérie's ears sounded the beating of her heart. It seemed to her as though he, too, must hear it. Once or twice she paused, pressing her hands against her bosom in the futile effort to still the throbbing within. A blackbird flew across the path occasionally with a startled chuckle, and a finch, flitting from one bough to another, uttered its piercing call; squirrels scrambled up and down the fir-trees, with little scratchings and patterings; but the prevailing impression of the woods at this hour was of a vast and overwhelming silence. Waldenek's quiet footfalls seemed to harmonise with this stillness, to accentuate without disturbing it, as the rever-

ent footsteps of a worshipper break not the solemn silence of a church; but Valérie's little hurrying feet, her quick breathing, and eager, loud-beating heart, were in a manner out of place in this woodland sanctuary.

After what seemed a very long time Waldenek paused. The winding path had led him high up the hillside, and he had reached a point where a clearing had been made among the trees, so that a beautiful view was obtainable. A rustic bench, raised on a moss-grown plateau, had been thoughtfully provided for all who might wish to enjoy this prospect; and after a moment or two he climbed the platform and seated himself, suffering his eyes to wander from the undulating depths, clothed with every varying shade of green, which lay immediately beneath him, to the wooded heights opposite, the green slope further still, where the white stones of the cemetery glistened in the morning light, and beyond to where, in the far distance, mountain ranges, blue and purple, lost themselves in the blue of the sky.

When Waldenek had paused Valérie had also halted. Now she stood still mustering up courage to intrude upon his notice. A small

path branched off from that which she had followed, winding up the hillside above the spot where Waldenek sat, and passing through a clump of fir-trees a stone's throw from his bench. Valérie, gathering her draperies together, crept noiselessly up this path, breathing more freely when she found herself under the shadow of the firs; then, after a trembling pause, she began to play.

Surely no more strange adventure ever befell any man than that which thus overtook Waldenek. It was not every man, to begin with, who in spite of the fatigues of the preceding evening would have wandered to the woods at this early hour; but artists are renowned for doing unlooked-for things, and acting on the impulse of the moment. Waldenek had been tempted out by the beauty of the morning, and now sat drinking in this beauty, with the full appreciation of a nature tuned to all beautiful things. The prospect before his eyes was full of charm and variety; the warm, spicy, aromatic air was in itself a delight; his thoughts were full of music, and, of a sudden, music fell upon his ear — his own music, his Rêverie, played with wonderful tenderness and expression on

the violin. His first and predominant sensation was that of surprise — surprise, not at the unusualness of hearing music in such a place and at such an hour, but that his Rêverie, written for the piano, should adapt itself so exquisitely to the violin. He listened spell-bound, the beauty of the theme — his theme, conceived by his own brain, his own heart — intoxicating him as it had not done even in the first ecstasy of composition. He was carried away by his own passion, uplifted by his own desire. Tears stood in his eyes, and yet he smiled. Then all at once it was borne in upon him that the unseen musician was an artist, more than an artist, a genius. Only a genius could give evidence of such sympathy, such intuition, such extraordinary power. Why, he divined that which had eluded Waldenek himself; he brought to light secrets of which the Master had lost the key. This instrument of his could convey emotions of which he had indeed been conscious, but to which he had been unable to give adequate expression.

The last note died away, and Waldenek, springing to his feet, hastened towards the spot from which they had come.



From beneath the shadow of the firs a figure glided forth to meet him. The music had lifted Valérie, too, completely out of herself, sweeping away all hesitation, all fear, the last vestige of self-consciousness. She stood fully revealed now, her little transfigured face upraised, her white dress bathed in sunlight, her ruffled brown hair turning to gold in the morning rays. Waldenek paused, astonished, transfixed. What was this vision? A child, a sprite, the Spirit of the Woods? Then he took a step nearer and looked into her luminous, inspired eyes. Heavens! No — it was a woman!

"Who are you?" he cried, in tones which vibrated with emotion. "What are you? How do you come here?"

"I followed you," said Valérie; then, without waiting for further speech, she began to play again, a Prière of Waldenek's, which had won for him thunderous applause in London, but which had not been included in the programme of the preceding night.

Waldenek felt as it were bewitched. A less impressionable man would have succumbed to the glamour of the scene and of the hour, the

magic of the strange, beautiful little personality, the romance, the unusualness of this meeting, and when the peculiar susceptibilities, the somewhat insecure balance, the impulses and enthusiasms of a highly-wrought artistic nature are taken into consideration, it is not surprising that as Waldenek listened he gradually lost control over himself. It was his own music to which he was listening, his own thought, his creation; and yet mingled with it was something else. Through the sadness of his theme he could hear an underlying note of deeper pathos; added to his pleading there was a yet more moving, more desperate appeal. While she played it seemed to him that his own soul and hers were beseeching Heaven — for what?

At length Valérie, pausing, let the hand which held the bow drop by her side and looked straight into the Master's face, while over her own flashed one of her exquisite smiles.

"You can make your heart speak," she said, "but I can make it sing."

. . . . . .

Margot did not wake until her usual hour, when she sprang up, terrified to find that

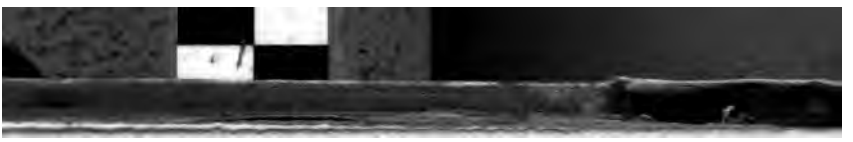
Valérie was not by her side. All her researches and anxious inquiries brought no satisfactory answer: no one had seen Valérie, no one could imagine whither she had gone. Margot put on her hat, and prepared to pursue her search in the town, intending to inquire, with due precaution, Waldenek's address, for she guessed that the disappearance of her wayward charge was connected with him; but just as she crossed the Nerothal she descried Valérie herself, tripping jubilantly to meet her. A few paces behind her, walking as though in a dream, was the great musician.

"Valérie!" cried Margot, stopping short, and clinging to the back rail of a friendly bench; the sudden revulsion of feeling caused her to turn white and faint.

But Valérie was too much intoxicated to heed.

"We have met," she cried, "and we have spoken together for a long time in the woods, and we know each other quite well. Oh, Margot! quel bonheur! quel délire!"

Casting a glance full of anguish and inquiry into Waldenek's face, Margot saw there, too, evidence of happiness so bewildering that it



might be called delirium. She drew Valérie towards her quickly with a little frightened maternal gesture. She was on the alert, ready to fight in the defence of her treasure.

Waldenek glanced at her, and a kindly smile chased away his former rapt expression. He held out his hand.

"So this is Grandfather Margot," he said.

He knew all, then — the details of their home-life, their little secret follies and tendernesses. This stranger, whom a few hours ago it had seemed hopeless even to aspire to meet, to what intimacy had he not been admitted during that morning in the wood? What had not Valérie told him? On what terms of friendship — of more than friendship — did they not now stand?

"He is coming in," cried Valérie; "he is going to play with me. Margot, Margot, think of that! He and I will play together — we will play his music. He thinks with me that my art completes his."

She spoke quite freely and fearlessly, and Waldenek, listening, betrayed no surprise. He seemed rather to acquiesce. Valérie led the way into the house, and Margot, giddy

and trembling with a complexity of emotions, followed without attempting to remonstrate. Indeed, any remonstrance would have been absolutely vain — Valérie had escaped from her hands.

Looking back afterwards on the hours that ensued, Margot could never quite realise what happened. Her mind was in a whirl. Waldenek was leaving by the mid-day train, and so the most must needs be made of the time that intervened. Breakfast was on the table, but did anybody touch it? Margot had afterwards a dim recollection of having endeavoured to persuade Valérie to drink some coffee; she saw Waldenek cross the room with an empty cup in his hand — had there ever been anything in it? She remembered breaking some bread and putting a morsel in her mouth, but it was so difficult to swallow that she had not repeated the experiment.

For the rest, there had been music, music, music! Valérie had played as she had never played before; Waldenek had played with her — they had been lost to all sense of their surroundings; even Margot, leaning back in her corner, had become almost as excited as they.



While she was still breathlessly marvelling and admiring, in spite of the sick pain at her heart, Waldenek had suddenly risen, declaring that it was time for him to go. He had clasped Valérie's hands — both hands — in his, and looked into her eyes, saying:

"We shall meet in London."

And Valérie had cried tremulously:

"Au revoir!"

When he was gone, she had thrown herself into Margot's arms, calling:

"Is it a dream? Is it a dream?"

Margot, many a time, in thinking over that strange morning's work, felt as if it had been indeed a dream.

XVII

CRESCENDO

EVEN when the first tremulous excitement and wonder had subsided, Margot found it difficult to gather from Valérie what had transpired during her momentous interview with Waldenek upon the Neroberg.

"What did we talk about?" Valérie cried impatiently. "How can I tell? I do not think we talked at all. I played — we talked of music," she added inconsequently.

"How was it then he first addressed me as Grandfather Margot? It seems to me that to know this little familiar name he must also know something of our circumstances."

"He asked me," said Valérie dreamily, "if I were wandering about the world alone — if I had no parents, no one to take care of me; and I told him I had no parents, but a little sister who was father and mother in one; who was indeed so wise, though she was so young, that I called her my Patriarch, my Bon Papa."



Margot was silent for a moment, feeling again that odd pang of jealousy.

"Did you tell him nothing else?" she asked presently.

"I told him I was a failure," said Valérie, with a childish droop of the lip. "He said I was a genius — ah, I assure you he thought a great deal of my playing — so I thought it as well he should know. And he told me that once, long ago, he had been so poor, so poor, that he had not anything to eat, and he walked a long way, and his shoes were so old and so worn that they dropped from his feet. He had walked to some great town — Vienna I think — and was standing gazing at a *Pianofabrik*, when a lady chanced to pass by, and asked him why he was looking in so eagerly. "Because I want to play," said he. So she took him by the hand — this poor, ragged, barefooted boy — and led him in, and made the master of the Fabrik consent to let him try one of the pianos. After he touched the notes he forgot where he was, and played, and played, and was supremely happy. And all at once, raising his eyes, he found that the place was crowded; people were pressing round on all sides, and some were

weeping. He told me with a smile that it was at that moment his success began — he made friends there who helped him until he was strong enough to stand alone."

"You see you must after all have talked a good deal," said Margot, much relieved that the conversation should have been so rational. "Did he tell you anything more? It was very interesting, that."

"Let me see, did he tell me anything more? No, I think not. He kept saying, 'Play, play' — and I played, and we understood each other through the music better than if we had talked for hours."

Valérie was lying back in a low chair, her hands clasped beneath her head, and her eyes gazing upwards; presently she continued in a reflective tone, "Yes, I think he must know that I love him."

"Valérie," cried Margot, turning quite pale, and crossing the room to her sister's side; "I wish you would not say such things even in jest."

"It is not jest — it is the truth; a most blessed and blissful truth. I love him, and he knows that I do — at least I hope he does. I should be glad for him to know. What

greater tribute can one give a great man than the homage of one's love?" She spoke quite calmly, still leaning back in her chair, gazing pensively at the ceiling, and swinging one little foot backwards and forwards.

"I know you are scandalised," she continued presently. "I cannot help it. Surely you know, Margot, that a feeling like this cannot be trammelled by the ordinary conventional rules. From the first moment I saw Paul Waldenek I knew that I loved him — well, now it is a satisfaction to me to think that he knows it too."

"And does he also love you?" asked Margot in strangled tones.

"How can you ask? I think he liked my music — but that he should love me! — Ah, you are cruel to suggest such a thing. Think, I am but a unit amid thousands of worshippers; till yesterday he had never heard of me. Oh no, in my wildest flights I have never dreamt of his loving me."

"And yet you have sometimes said," insisted Margot, almost bitterly, "that his music told you he wanted you, that you were made for each other."

"That was before I had spoken to him,"

cried Valérie passionately. "He is a king among men — and I, what am I? Nothing! Nothing! Let us speak of him no more."

Margot's anxiety did not diminish, it may be supposed, after this conversation, and yet it was a noticeable fact that Valérie's attitude of mind was on the whole calmer than before her meeting with the great artist. She did not talk of him now; she practised as assiduously as before, but varied her programme, consenting, to Margot's great relief, to play the works of other composers as well as his. She seemed to dream less, and though her sister was conscious that this outward serenity was due to some hidden, ever-bubbling source of bliss, she could not but rejoice at it. Valérie seemed to enjoy the present to the full, and to contemplate the future without the dread and aversion with which she had formerly looked forward to it. She spoke quite calmly of their return to London, of the little house which Margot had feared would now seem more despicable than ever in her eyes, and of taking up anew their former life and pursuits.

One day, however, a chance word divulged the reason of this change.

"Waldenek will be returning to London in the autumn," she observed.

It was then that Margot's anxious heart began to torment itself in earnest. Waldenek had no doubt been taken by Valérie's beauty and charm, and also struck by her undoubted genius; but was the impression more than transitory? Was it not unlikely that among new scenes and daily recurring triumphs, he would bestow even a passing thought upon his little nymph of the woods? And Valérie — let her say what she might, *she* was hoping and expecting, building castles in the air that, for all their unsubstantial fabric, would cause desperate havoc when overthrown.

Autumn came: the woods of the Neroberg assumed wondrous tints of crimson and gold; the grape-gathering was in full swing on the vine-covered hills which the sisters could see from their windows; all day long troops of peasant-women — looking very picturesque in the distance, carrying themselves, as they did, so erectly, with their baskets poised on their kerchiefed heads, and sadly unlovely and unpoetical at close quarters — climbed up and down between the ranks of green. The grape-

clusters, which from afar looked like little black dots irregularly scattered among the trim rows, were growing fewer and fewer day by day; the air was full of the honey-sweet odour of the freshly pressed fruit. Looking at Valérie's rounded cheeks, once more gay with their wonted soft bloom, marking the light in her eyes, the elasticity of her step, Margot realised that her harvest, too, was gathered in; the little sister had found ample store of health and strength and fresh joy of life in this quiet corner of the Fatherland. What were they waiting for? Why should they not return at once? Alas! she knew well that it was not solely on Valérie's account that she dreaded this return. Here, far away from the scene of her customary toils and struggles, she could better put away the thought of her own spoilt and empty life. There was nothing to expect, nothing to hope for; she could in a manner vegetate in the actual present. But how would it be with her when once more in London, face to face with the old problems, sick at heart with the old fears, and with no one to help and comfort and advise? The personality of John Croft had been, by her own act, absolutely

removed from the sphere of her existence; he and she would never meet again. So she had decreed; it was her own work; and yet that foolish inconsequent heart of hers quailed at the idea of it. Now that she realised that he had taken her mandate literally, and would obey it to the letter, it seemed to her that it would be scarcely possible to face life without him.

However, to such a nature as Margot's the word *impossible* in cases like this — when it is merely self that has to be conquered, inclination that must be overcome — has no real significance. Margot knew very well that she must face her life and take up her old duties, and when the proper time came she made all needful preparations for their departure.

October found them back in Pitt Street, and before a month had passed Margot had regained many of her former pupils and settled down to her routine of work. It would be hard to say which sister looked out more anxiously for the return of Waldenek, though it was with very different feelings that they awaited his coming. A sense of breathless expectation fell upon them both when a paragraph in the papers

informed them that a date was actually fixed for a recital by him at no very distant period. Needless to say places were secured at once, and both sisters looked forward, the one with blissful trembling hope, the other with dread, to the day on which they should again see and hear him.

The programme duly appeared and was eagerly studied by the sisters; Valérie identifying with rapt delight each item. All at once she caught her breath, gazing with dilated eyes at the last on the list.

"Oh, Margot, look there! What does that mean? '*To the Beloved;* Rhapsodie: Waldenek'!"

Margot tried to laugh. "Well," she said, "it is evidently one of his own compositions. I am sure it will be very beautiful."

"To the Beloved!" repeated Valérie. "Margot, Margot, this I cannot bear. The Beloved! It did not hurt me to think that he would never love me, and I do not care how many love him. I am quite content to be one among them. But that *he* should stoop to love a woman, to single out one of his worshippers in particular, should dedicate his music to her! What has



she done to deserve such happiness? Why should it be she and not I? Oh, Margot, I hate her!"

She clenched her hands and showed her little teeth fiercely. "I could kill her!" she cried.

The days which followed passed slowly and miserably. Valérie scarcely ate or slept, and her occasional paroxysms of jealous anguish were violent enough to alarm her sister. Margot asseverated in vain that probably Waldenek was merely addressing an abstraction; that he had given his "Rhapsodie" this title because it seemed to him poetical and appropriate to the theme. Valérie scouted the notion with scorn, upbraiding the ignorance which had prompted it, and Margot was forced to hold her peace.

The sisters were installed in their places, as may be guessed, long before the hour fixed for the beginning of the Recital; Valérie's eyes, while awaiting Waldenek's appearance, fixing themselves on the printed words which had never ceased to haunt her since she had first read them. *To the Beloved. To the Beloved.* They seemed to burn themselves into heart and brain; even when eager applause announced

the advent of the artist, and her eyes sought his face, they seemed to float in letters of fire between her and him.

The Master surpassed himself; so everyone said, and so the unbounded delight of the audience would seem to testify; but these three words made discord for Valérie of all sweetness and charm and harmony. She could not enjoy, she scarcely heard, so great was the tumult within her, so feverish her expectation and despair.

At last Waldenek took his seat before the instrument for the last time, struck a few preliminary chords, and then the hush which supervened was broken by the first low notes of what seemed to be a Pastoral. Lo! as Valérie listened she heard the piping of the birds, the fluttering of the leaves at dawn, the still, drowsy stir of awakening nature — it recalled to her that morning in the woods of the Neroberg, and a pang of utter rage and woe swept over her heart. This morning of mornings which she had deemed absolutely hers, sacred to her alone, had been to him but one of many; he had known other such; in the company of this unknown Beloved of his he had roamed other

woods and found other dawn-music just as heavenly sweet. Now the strain was swelling louder, more impetuous; the sun was piercing the shimmering leaves, drawing out the warm wood spices; the flowers were unfolding; steps were falling upon the quiet woodland paths. To Valérie it seemed as though she could hear the bounding of the Master's heart in the triumphant jubilant notes; a suggestion of infinite delight, of ever-increasing, ever more intoxicating joy; and then the sounds died away, and only low rippling notes seemed to indicate expectation. A kind of wonder fell upon Valérie; it seemed to her that the Master was wondering too; every soul, indeed, of that vast listening multitude waited and wondered. And then, what was this? Woven into this strange new work came fragments of other compositions familiar to all who had before heard Waldenek play, most tenderly, blissfully familiar to Valérie. Her day of days was hers still; her forest sanctuary had not been desecrated; she was harkening to herself playing, as she had played that summer dawn, with the Master for her only listener.

An almost intolerable ecstasy flooded her

soul as she realised that through the music Waldenek was speaking to her, was recalling, in exquisite, inimitable fashion, the rapture of their meeting. He had understood, then, all that she would have had the music tell him; and now he was answering, telling her, too, many things which she scarcely dared to believe. He had wandered off into higher flights of melody. This, at least, had been never heard before. In this new strain there was passionate entreaty, insistent pleading, and mingled with it the same suggestion of infinite joy. *To the Beloved* — the Beloved!

. . . . . .

The scene swam before Valérie's eyes; the figure of the Master grew indistinct; the music sounded far away. She had been pressing close to Margot as though for support, and now began to lean more heavily. After a moment Margot turned and looked at her, and found that she had swooned. It was not possible to move until the close of the performance, and even then some little time elapsed before Margot could convey her sister to the open air. Meanwhile, to her great relief, Valérie revived of

herself, and when at last there was a move was able to walk with her sister's assistance to the door. Margot only breathed freely when they found themselves in the cab driving towards home; Valérie's extraordinary emotion terrified her. It was not so much her sister's faintness which alarmed her as the fear that she should not be sufficiently recovered to leave the hall with the rest of the audience. She dreaded an encounter with Waldenek in Valérie's present condition of mind. If she were to see him what might she not say — what might she not do?

In the cab Valérie sat beside her, one little cold hand in hers, her face white as wax, and yet illuminated by some inward light of happiness, her eyes dilated and shining too. Only once she spoke:

"Margot, you heard that Rhapsodie, *To the Beloved?* The Beloved is I."

Margot did not answer; she did not know the grounds on which Valérie based her conviction. She had realised that during the playing of the Rhapsodie her sister's feelings had undergone a change; the agitation to which she was a prey was rather the agitation of hap-

piness than of despair; nevertheless she could only think the sudden revulsion transitory, and deem that Valérie had added one more hallucination to those which already beset her.

When they reached home she endeavoured to persuade her sister to lie down, brought her tea, and tried by many loving words to calm her excitement. But Valérie scoffed at the notion of rest; she was not tired, she said; she was too well, too happy. She walked up and down the room, according to her habit when agitated, letting her untasted tea grow cold, and humming to herself little snatches of Waldenek's music. At every ring of the bell she paused, listening eagerly; then she would resume her walk. Frequently when she heard wheels in the street below she would rush to the window, turning away with a disappointed face as the sound was lost in the distance.

To Margot, whose nerves were also of the highly-strung order, Valérie's feverish expectation and suspense gradually became intolerable. At last, to distract her thoughts and if possible those of her sister, she drew down the blinds, and lighting the candles on the piano,

sat down and began to play one of Chopin's Preludes, unconsciously choosing the well-known No. 15, wherein it is supposed that during a storm of rain the great composer chronicled his impatience and longing at the non-appearance of his loved one at the appointed hour. Soon she was absorbed in the beauty of the work, and did not notice that Valérie had once more paused in the centre of the room, as though listening to sounds other than those which proceeded from the piano. It was not until a sudden draught of air made the candles flicker and grow dim that she raised her eyes to her sister's face; then, in response to the announcement plainly written there, she turned slowly on her music-stool.

Just within the open door immediately behind her stood Paul Waldenek. His eyes, looking past her, sought those of Valérie. It was from his face that her sister's had caught the reflection of hope and bewildering joy. He now advanced a step or two further into the room and stretched out his hands, still looking earnestly at Valérie.

"I have made my heart speak," he said; "will you make it sing?"

XVIII

SEMPRE CRESCENDO

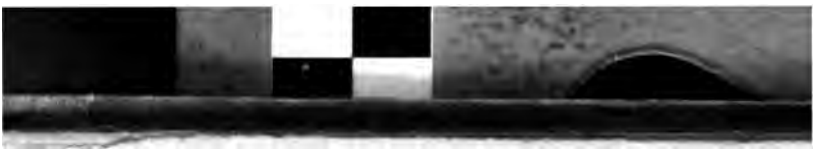
IF there had been a semblance of unreality about the first encounter with Waldenek, it seemed to Margot that this second meeting was still more dreamlike and extraordinary. She scarcely realised his meaning, until, clasping Valérie's hand in his, he approached Margot herself, stooping until those dark, ardent eyes of his were on a level with her own.

"Patriarch Margot," he said, "will you give me this child?"

It seemed impossible, as she said to herself, when a few minutes afterwards she sat in the chill darkness of her own little room; it must be impossible! And yet Waldenek had spoken plainly. He, the great master-musician, the composer with whose fame all Europe was ringing — he wanted to marry her little Valérie, her child, her baby, whom she had scarcely thought fit to walk alone. He and Valérie had

rhapsodised together while Margot had sat staring at them, just now, from her music-stool. He had told of all the wonderful things which he had known and felt when Valérie had played to him on the Neroberg; how he had received a revelation that here was a spirit kindred to his own, that Valérie's genius was the complement of his; that her life was meant to merge into his, her sweet love to be his glory and his crown. Since that morning, he said, the thought of Valérie had been ever present to him; what need, therefore, for delay? Following her cue he had let his music speak for him to-day, and now he had come for his answer. And then Valérie had chimed in, and talked a great deal of rapturous nonsense. No time was needed, Margot was informed, for souls like Waldenek's and hers to ripen acquaintance; they had known each other intimately and entirely from the first moment they had met; they had also loved each other, belonged to each other. Margot looked at the two beautiful radiant faces and was mute. By-and-by she rose and stole softly from the room.

"They do not want me," she said to herself



with cold lips as she crept up the stairs. Amid her astonishment, her doubts, the joy which she could not help feeling in this unlooked-for blissful triumph of her sister, there was a stealthy undercurrent of pain. Valérie would want her no more. Her bird had spread its wings and would soon soar high, never to return to the humble nest again. But this thought must not be dwelt on; an almost intolerable swelling of the heart warned her of its danger. To-night she would think only of Valérie; she would try to rejoice unselfishly in her happiness and to put away her own fears.

"He looks kind," she said to herself over and over again. "He has kind eyes — I think he will be good to her."

By-and-by sounds of music in the room below made her start. Waldenek and Valérie were playing together.

Surely there was never such a whimsical courtship as this! The two musicians met daily; both were deeply in love; but it would seem as much with the art as with the personality of each other. Their talk was chiefly of music; scarcely had they met before the instruments were in requisition; they wooed each other with exquisite sounds.

They were to be married early in the year, Waldenek intending to proceed immediately afterwards to America to fulfil a long-promised engagement. They would return in six months, so Margot must not be unhappy. No, Margot would not be unhappy; she would take care of herself while they were away.

"If ever we have a settled home, you must live with us, my Bon Papa," said Valérie.

Margot smiled rather sadly.

"You will not be likely to have a settled home for some time, I fancy. Your husband will be obliged to lead something of a wandering life."

Valérie's eyes lit up.

"Think of it, Margot. A wandering life with him; always listening to him, always with him! He and I roaming the world together!"

Margot said nothing, but Valérie noticed the expression of her half-averted face.

"You shall wander too, little sister of my heart," she cried, throwing her arms around her neck; "you shall wander with us. There shall be a little room for our Bon Papa wherever we go."

Margot gently unwound the clinging arms and turned away, attempting to speak lightly.

"No, no, Bon Papa must stay at home and work," she said. "I shall grow so rich and make my house so smart that you will be proud to come and stay with me."

"Yes, that will be delightful," said Valérie. "When we come you shall have such music, my Margot! Do you know Paul is writing a series of Romances for the violin and piano which he and I are to play together? He has already written one. It is a dream. Listen — it goes so."

The Cremona was brought out once more, and Margot was left to do battle with her own sore heart.

Great happiness is apt to be selfish. These two artists, at no time prone to consider consequences, or to take heed of things outside their own particular emotions, failed to realise what havoc their union must make in the life of the little sister whose all was thus about to be taken from her. It did not strike them that their raptures must necessarily cause her pain, sympathetic though she was; that the plans and projects in which she could have no part must fill her with a sense of desolation. Wrapped up in each other and in their art,

they did not notice how the struggle to maintain a semblance of cheerfulness grew daily more hard for Margot, and how the effort to repress the jealous anguish of which she was conscious in seeing Valérie's entire absorption was at times scarcely possible to her.

She was of course glad to see Valérie so happy. Was not Valérie's happiness the object of her life? For as long as she could remember, had not her toils and her prayers been directed to this end? And now Valérie had of a sudden been raised to a far higher pinnacle of bliss than her sister had ever dared to hope for. Even to the anxious, suspicious eyes of the duenna it became evident that, not only as an artist, but as a man, Waldenek was worthy of Valérie's choice. Margot watched him narrowly, and day by day her respect and affection for her prospective brother-in-law increased. He was indeed dreamy, and, to a certain extent, unpractical; there was an almost childlike simplicity about him, a curious unworldliness which made Margot sometimes wonder how it was that he had contrived to make his way so well in the past, and to ask herself how it would fare with the two erratic beings when



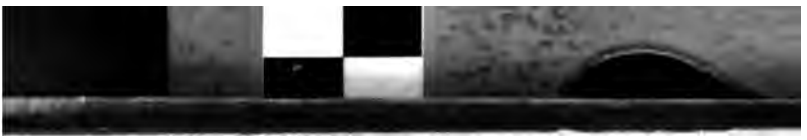
her beloved, impulsive, inconsequent little Valérie had joined her fate to his. Waldenek was, moreover, large-minded and generous, incapable of an ill-natured thought or a mean action. His devotion to Valérie was wonderful, and Margot thought it would last.

So great was Waldenek's desire to obtain recognition for Valérie that he had not patience to wait until their union had taken place. About a month after their engagement, he made arrangements for her to play with him at a concert at St. James's Hall. The affair was of course easily managed once he took it in hand; it seemed strange to Margot, indeed, to find how easily. This time there was no necessity for exertion, no anxieties, no difficulties; everything ran smoothly. Waldenek had the matter so very much at heart that, on this occasion, he proved himself to be wide-awake and businesslike. No one else needed to move in the matter. Margot found it odd to watch preparations going forward for this great event and to realise that she had no part in them; it was curious and painful to think that Valérie no longer needed her help. She would play in public, and the greatest artist of

the time would accompany her, not the little sister whose assistance had been hitherto considered an indispensable part of the programme. Margot would not be beside her to sustain her if she grew nervous or flurried, to prompt her with advice, to assist at her triumph. Margot was not wanted now.

When the auspicious day came she helped Valérie to dress — that at least was her department; here her loving, deft little fingers were of some use. Valérie was flushed and excited, laughing and chattering gaily. Margot tried to answer in the same tone, and Valérie was too much preoccupied to notice that her cheerfulness was forced. She did not weep — no tears, at least, came to her eyes — but she wept inwardly, feeling as though scalding, bitter drops were falling on her heart.

Valérie's success was immediate and complete. It could scarcely be otherwise. As the future Madame Waldenek she would have received a sympathetic reception even had her own talent been less great; but when the beautiful, interesting little personage who was so soon to bear the great artist's name proved to possess a genius scarcely less wonderful than



his, the enthusiasm of the audience knew no bounds. Indeed, no such musical treat had for years been offered to the public. The pieces chosen were of the Master's own composition — wild, sweet, exquisite music, played to absolute perfection by these two whose spirits seemed to be one. Even Margot was satisfied with the manner with which Waldenek subordinated himself to Valérie, his performance blending itself with hers in a manner which sustained without ever dominating it.

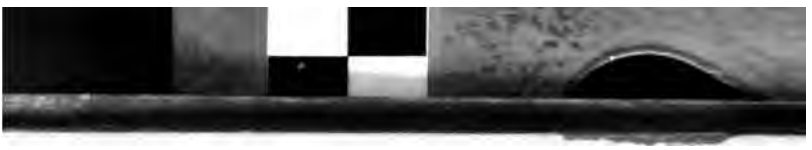
A tide of immense unselfish joy swept over her heart as, watching from a side door, she beheld her sister led forth again and again to receive enthusiastic applause.

By-and-by Valérie rejoined her, sparkling and triumphant, hugging tightly an immense bouquet.

"Ah, Margot, what a difference!" she cried joyously. "This is success, if you like!"

Margot would not dash her exultation by a word of reproach; she buried her face in the flowers instead of replying, and by-and-by Valérie was called away again. Then Margot allowed the irrepressible sadness within her free scope. Oh, yes, what a difference! This

was success, indeed, and she had had no hand in it. Hers had been the struggles and the fruitless labours, and Waldenek, by uplifting his finger, had secured the crown. Oh, it was hard! She had tried her best, she had sacrificed herself, and to no purpose; she could not even console herself with the thought that it was through her that Valérie had made acquaintance with him who had brought all this glory into her life. No, no, little Valérie had done it all for herself; she had come, and seen, and conquered. Margot, who would fain have given her heart's blood to further her interests, had, with all her good-will and anxiety, achieved nothing. A few paces away from her Valérie was standing facing an expectant multitude; hundreds of eyes were fixed on her, hundreds of hands applauded her. How often had she dreamt of such a scene; and now, as Valérie said, what a difference! Was there half so much savour, after all, in a triumph achieved at so little cost? It would have been sweeter, even to Valérie, she thought, if they two had worked for it together. *This* was not the success they both had planned; this was not Valérie Kostolitz taking the world by storm



entirely by the power of her own genius; it was through the influence of her future husband that she obtained a hearing. Their wild, sweet dream of long ago would never be realised now: Valérie and she would no longer toil together; and her own past toils had been unrewarded, her sacrifices fruitless.

As she stood alone and silent there came to her with an exceedingly bitter pang the thought of how great one sacrifice had been. For Valérie's sake she had cast away her personal happiness; all the love she had to give had been bestowed on John Croft, and yet when he had offered her his own — when he had bent over her, pleading and entreating — she had silenced and dismissed him. Not even he, not all that he had to give her, could tempt her from her loyalty to Valérie. She was indispensable to Valérie, she had said; Valérie could not live without her; and now the impossible had come to pass: Valérie wanted her no more! Valérie had done with her, and John Croft had done with her too. He had not written to condole with her when she had told him of Valérie's illness, and he did not write now to congratulate her on Valérie's engage-

ment. He must know of it — everyone knew of it. This tit-bit of musical intelligence had appeared in all the papers; most of their acquaintances had written to congratulate them, and John Croft was silent. Well, what could she expect — what consideration had she shown *him?* Had she not proved to him of how little account she held his devotion? She had rebuffed and offended him before, and he had forgiven her; but this time he had been too deeply wounded; he had cast her outside his life. So, while Valérie played and the public applauded, Margot, the faithful duenna who had till now lived but for her, listened apathetically, and was only conscious of her own breaking heart.

The feeling of the subtle division between her and Valérie increased as the wedding-day drew near. The little bride was so taken up with plans and projects for her new life that the thought of the approaching separation found no place in her mind. Like many of her kind, Valérie was wont to let any strong emotion take entire possession of her for the time, excluding or deadening all others. She had, moreover, a constitutional dislike to dwelling



on anything sad or unsatisfactory; therefore, even if she had noticed Margot's inward distress, she would in all probability have striven to banish the thought of it. Margot had always wanted her to be happy, and now she was happy. True, she and Waldenek were going away, but it would only be for a few months, and then they would all be together again, and she would have so much to tell Margot. This was Valérie's mental attitude whenever she was troubled by a passing recollection of the change in her sister's life which her own approaching nuptials must cause. Margot, on her side, made no complaint; gave utterance to no affectionate regrets. Joined to her genuine desire that Valérie's happiness should be absolutely unshadowed, there was a certain element of wounded pride. If her personal feelings were not considered she would not allude to them herself; her pain was of no account — no one should guess at it. She was very busy just then, employing every spare moment in sewing for Valérie. All the underclothing of the little trousseau which she insisted on preparing for her was made by her own hands. She committed extravagances in the matter of

fine cambric and real lace, which she meant to expiate afterwards by months of rigid personal economy. It consoled her to remember that she might still suffer and make sacrifices for Valérie, even after she had lost her.

It was on a cold, raw January day that Margot finally handed over her treasure to the keeping of Paul Waldenek. By his express desire — a desire which indeed coincided with the sisters' own feelings — the wedding was kept strictly private.

"Just you and I," Waldenek had said, looking dreamily and tenderly at his betrothed.

"You will want me," cried Margot, with a sudden flash in her blue eyes. "She is mine still, remember! I must give her away."

"Oh, yes, Margot must come!" exclaimed Valérie. "My Patriarch must be there, or the ceremony will not be valid."

"Oh, yes, our Margot must come, of course," agreed the Master, turning his eyes towards her with one of those kind, sympathetic glances which, when vouchsafed to her, caused Margot to forgive him for having robbed her of her darling. There were times — when he came down from the clouds — when he seemed to



understand and feel for her more than Valérie; but unfortunately he so soon went up into the clouds again. A word from Valérie, a note from her Cremona, and such minor things as the aching heart of her faithful sister were forgotten.

"I only meant," he pursued, still looking sympathetically at Margot, "we will not let anyone else know. We will keep the public out. Our great day — our sacred day — must be kept to ourselves."

His glance had wandered off to Valérie now, and its expression made clear to Margot that "ourselves" in his thought did not include her.

Well, the wedding-day came, and the sisters drove together to the church. Valérie was in white. She had insisted on this; and when Waldenek saw her thus attired he had not demurred. "It would remind him of his vision in the woods," he said.

The ceremony did not take long, and, regardless of all precedent, the three drove back together in the hired brougham which had conveyed the sisters to the church. Margot sat with her back to the horse, gazing at the little

gold ring which looked so oddly out of place on Valérie's childish finger, and repeating to herself, "She is married; Valérie is married."

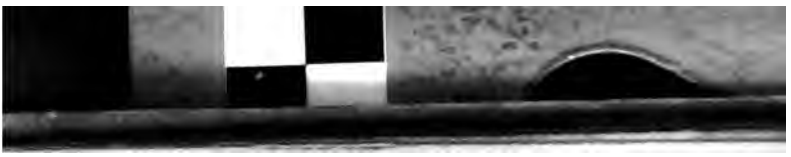
The bride and bridegroom were also commenting on the wondrous fact of their union; but in spite of the evidence of her senses Margot could not in the least realise what had taken place. She felt cold, and dull, and hard; smiling and answering mechanically when they looked at or addressed her; shedding no tears, and scarcely conscious of sadness.

"By-and-by I shall have time enough to feel sad," she said to herself.

After the simple wedding breakfast, the newly married couple were to start. They were to proceed to Liverpool that afternoon, and to embark on the following morning. Just as they were rising from the table Waldenek appeared to remember something, and, drawing a folded paper from the pocket of his coat, he held it out to Valérie.

"A Wedding Song," he said, "for thee and me. I wrote it this morning."

Valérie's face lit up. "Ah," she cried, "this is like you! And to think it is I who have inspired this. Let me see — how does it go?



Ah, it is lovely! Quick, let us try it! My violin, Margot — where is my violin? Paul, come to the piano."

In another moment they were absorbed in the Wedding Song, lost to all sense of external things. Margot, with a swelling heart, went upstairs. She could feel *now*. Even these few brief moments, the last which Valérie might yet spend at home, were denied to her. She had counted on, hungered for, a few words just at the end. While the others had been eating she had been longing for the moment to come when Valérie would go with her upstairs; then she would have folded her in her arms, relieving the love and sorrow in her heart by a passionate embrace. Surely Valérie would have turned to her then and clung to her: in spite of her recent excitement and absorption, Margot had never doubted the sincerity of the little creature's love for her. But now the "Wedding Song" had swept away this last hope.

She locked her sister's boxes, strapped up the rugs, and prepared a little basket of provisions for the journey; then she sat down and waited quietly till the sound of wheels in the street below warned her that the carriage had



arrived which was to take them to the station. It had been ordered in good time, so there were still a few minutes to spare for Valérie's remaining preparations. Running downstairs, Margot approached the musicians.

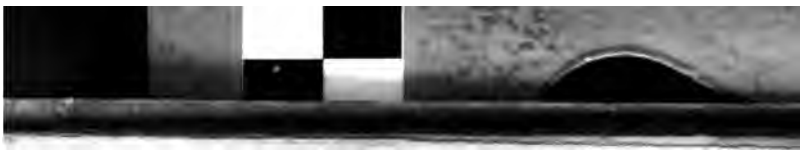
"Valérie, you must come now. The carriage is here. I would not disturb you till it came, but you must change your dress, remember."

"Already!" exclaimed Valérie. "Did you hear my Wedding Song, Margot? It is — Ah, I cannot tell you what it is! Why did you not stay and listen? Now you will not hear it till we come back."

"I was obliged to get everything ready, you know," said Margot. "But come, you must make haste or you will miss the train."

"Oh, that would be dreadful," cried Valérie, rushing upstairs. "Paul has made all his preparations. Quick, where is my dress? Ah, you have put it all ready, my good little Margot. Do help me to fasten it. Quick, quick, I do not want to miss the train. Margot, that Wedding Song is divine. Paul has surpassed himself."

"I am very glad. Now here is your hat. Let me tie your veil for you; but first,



Valérie — " Her voice faltered suddenly, choking sobs rose in her throat; she had been about to say: "First let me kiss you," when the sudden rush of emotion had overpowered her. She stood still, her face averted, and Valérie in her haste and excitement did not guess why she had suddenly broken off.

"Never mind the veil," she cried hurriedly; "we can put it on in the carriage. Margot, do run down and see that my Cremona is in its case. Paul may have thought of putting it in, but you had better make sure."

The opportunity was gone. Margot ran downstairs as desired, dashing the tears from her eyes and swallowing down her sobs. No, she would not cry, not now; there would be time enough to cry afterwards. Valérie must not part from her in sadness.

On the way to the station she again insisted on sitting opposite the newly married pair, watching them vaguely as they bent their heads together over the manuscript sheet of music. Waldenek's white hair and pale, strongly-marked features contrasting with the brightness and bloom of his young bride. The chubby hand which bore the ridiculous wed-

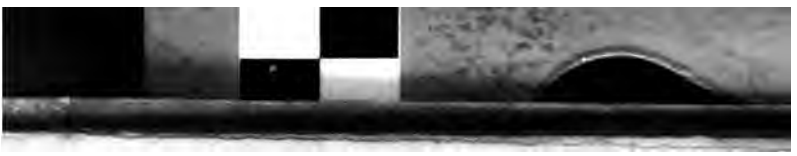
ding-ring was passed through his arm; now and then the fingers drummed upon his sleeve. Margot, presently leaning forward, took hold of the other hand, kissing the fingers gently, one by one. Dear little soft, warm fingers! She would console herself with the remembrance of their touch later on when she was alone. Valérie looked up for a moment and smiled across at her, giving Margot's hand a little squeeze; then, once more leaning against Waldenek, she went on humming the Wedding Song in his ear.

They had only a few minutes to spare when they arrived at the station, and all was bustle and confusion until the travellers and their belongings were safely installed in their carriage.

"There are two minutes more," said Margot.

"Lean out, Valérie, that I may kiss you! But first put this little basket safely away. I thought you might be hungry on the journey, and I have put in some provisions for you. See, there are some biscuits and some sandwiches — sandwiches of pâté de lièvre; you know you are always fond of pâté de lièvre."

"Oh, Margot!" cried Valérie, and, of a sud-



den, two great round tears jumped out on her cheeks. Somehow this little proof of homely forethought recalled in a moment all that she had hitherto forgotten. Margot's constant care and tender love; the home life ended forever. "Oh, Margot!" she cried again with a little gasp, and suddenly sprang out of the carriage and on to the platform, flinging her arms round Margot's neck. "Oh, my little sister, my little mother, you think of everything and I have never thought of you! No, I will not go away from you; I will stay with you; I will never leave you, my beloved Bon Papa. No, no, it is useless to talk to me; I will not go!"

Porters were noisily clapping the carriage doors; already the guard was preparing to wave his green flag. Waldenek, in much anxiety and alarm, had also descended; but Valérie still clung weeping to Margot.

"Does she really wish to stay with you?" asked the husband, pale with anxiety. "I will not take her away if it makes her unhappy."

"No, no," said Margot with a wan smile. "In two minutes she will have forgotten her sadness. My little Valérie, God bless you! You are my own Valérie still, and nothing will

change you. Take her, Paul, and be good to her. My darling, good-bye."

Between them they forced Valérie into the carriage, and the train moved off, Paul standing by the window, while his wife clung to him weeping. Margot, through a sudden rush of tears, watched that window till it was out of sight, being comforted at the last by the apparition of a little hand frantically waving.

"She will be all right now," she said, and fell to sobbing.

XIX

FINALE CON MOLTO SENTIMENTO

THE carriage which had conveyed the party to the station was, by Waldenek's order, to drive Margot home again; and once within its friendly shelter she allowed her grief to take its course unchecked.

Valérie's sudden display of feeling had been, it is true, inexpressibly sweet and consoling to her, but at the same time it accentuated her sense of loss. It was indeed her own little Valérie who had gone from her — Valérie, who had clung to her and depended on her, and wanted her, all her life. Would she not need her still? Would even Waldenek be to her just what she was? As for Margot herself, how was she to live now? What was she to live for? She thought of going back to the empty house, which would be so gloomy, so lonely, without that sunny presence; of the silence which Valérie's babble, scarcely less

musical in her sister's ears than the sounds of her Cremona, would no more break; she pictured herself crossing the narrow hall, mounting with lagging steps the shabby stairs, finding herself at last in the familiar room where everything would speak to her of Valérie, and Valérie herself would be absent. There would be no need now to worry about anything; it seemed to Margot that even the worries connected with Valérie had a certain sweetness in them. There would be no one to be anxious about; no one to plan for; no one to scold. It seemed to her as if the whole framework of her life had suddeny collapsed, and she felt neither strength nor inclination to build it up anew. How should she get through the months that must elapse before she saw her darling again? How should she get through this one day even, the day of departure of which many weary hours remained to run? The carriage was bowling along all too swiftly. Soon she would be at home, if it could be called home now, shut in with her own loneliness and misery. The carriage had now turned into the Park, and, acting on a sudden impulse, Margot called to the driver to stop.



"I will get out here," she said, "and walk the rest of the way."

Heaven knew the way would be short enough. She plodded slowly along under the leafless trees, drops of moisture falling on her as she passed. The early wintry sunset was making a transitory glory of its own in the murky sky, building up primrose and saffron fires above the great piles of buildings; the path beneath her feet was wet, and the air raw and chilly, but she did not quicken her pace; she regretted every step that brought her nearer home.

At length, however, the Park was left behind, and she wandered lingeringly along the streets which seemed so empty now that Valérie's little figure was not flitting by her side. Several times people turned and looked at her, but she did not notice their curious, pitying glances, nor realise how woe-begone was her face, nor the fact that she was sobbing aloud as she walked.

Here was Pitt Street at last, and yonder was the little house, the lonely, desolate, dreadful little house which she must enter. She climbed the steps reluctantly, and drew her latch-key from her pocket, but her hand was so tremulous

and her eyes so dim that she bungled sadly in her attempts to make it fit the lock.

"You had better let me do that for you," said a voice beside her.

While she had been fumbling with the key someone had suddenly crossed the street and bounded up the steps; a hand that she knew was now stretched forth to take possession, not only of the key, but of the hand which held it.

Margot turned round, and the tears, of which her eyes had been full, brimmed over and rolled down her cheeks. The cloud of sadness had been so heavy on her heart that the sudden apparition of John Croft could not at once dissipate it; it seemed to her, indeed, at the moment, that his presence was more than she could bear. She turned her little pitiful face towards him, and uplifted her sweet blue drowned eyes. Meeting his tender, compassionate gaze, it seemed to her natural to speak to him, as she had always done, of her troubles.

"Oh, Sir John," she cried, "Valérie is gone! I have no one to take care of now."

"You have been taking care of people too long," said Croft. "It is time for you to be taken care of yourself."

Something in the tone of his voice, in the expression of his face, made her drop her eyes; but after a moments' pause she looked up, saying with a sob:

"Valérie was married this morning."

"I know," said Croft; "that is why I have come. I want to console you."

The little fast-darkening street was very quiet, save where at the farther end a milkman was going his rounds.

"You knew," cried Margot quickly, "and you have been silent till now. You never wrote — I did not think you cared."

"I was biding my time," said John. "I felt that your loss was my gain. I thought that in your sorrow you would perhaps turn to me."

His other hand was now stretched forth to clasp her disengaged one; she did not refuse it, but answered rather the letter of his words than the spirit in which they were spoken.

"You are glad of my sorrow. That is not kind."

"I am glad," repeated Sir John steadily, "of my own opportunity."

"I thought you had forgotten me," said Margot, still plaintively: it was so natural to

make her plaint to him of all that troubled her. "When I told you that Valérie was ill I thought you would have written."

"You told me not to write," remarked Sir John, looking down at her with a smile in his eyes. "No, no," he pursued quickly, as he saw her lip quiver, "I cannot allow you to think me unkind. I did not get that letter until some weeks after you wrote it — I was yachting, and it followed me about — and then, do you know what I did? I came straight to London. You did not forbid me to come, you know, though you forbade me to write. Somehow I had a kind of feeling that you wanted me, Margot. I thought I might help and advise you; you know all my experience has not taught me that my advice is not a valuable thing." He was laughing outright now, and Margot smiled too, faintly and tremulously. Croft went on more gravely:

"When I came here I found you had already gone away, and Jane told me there was better news of Valérie. So then I resolved to wait. You did not want me then; I would wait until you did. I desired Jane not to mention that I had called. Do you think me very indiscreet, Margot?"

"Not indiscreet," said Margot, with a little droop of the lip; "but — not very kind."

Instead of looking conscience-stricken at the rebuke, Sir John's face lit up; this tacit acknowledgment of her dependence on him filled him with ecstasy.

"Have I been very cruel?" he cried with tender triumph. "Ah, sweet, all is fair in love and war, you know! When I first saw Valérie's engagement announced I rejoiced, but I resolved to make no sign; the time was not yet ripe for it. But I have been waiting and watching day by day. I found out, also through Jane — oh, Jane is my very good friend! — when the wedding would take place, and you would be left alone. I knew you would be coming home about this time from the station, and I have been walking about waiting for you. You know what I have been waiting for, Margot?"

Margot looked up at him without speaking, a great glow of happiness driving away the sadness from her face.

"I am waiting," pursued Sir John, "for an invitation to come in. You forbade me the house once, you know, and I resolved never

again to cross your doorstep without receiving permission from your own lips."

Margot hastily drew away the hand which held the key, bending her shy, blushing, happy face till it was on a level with the key-hole; her hand shook very much, but she at last succeeded in opening the door.

Then, turning again towards Croft, and timidly suffering the fingers which he still held to close on his, she pulled him gently forward, crying: "Come in, dear friend; come in."

"No," said Sir John in a voice which vibrated with passion, "I am not your friend, Margot; I can never be your friend again. I must be more to you; I will have all or nothing. If I come into your house now, I must come into your heart, and into your life."

"Then, love," said Margot, very tenderly and earnestly, "dear love, come in."

THE END

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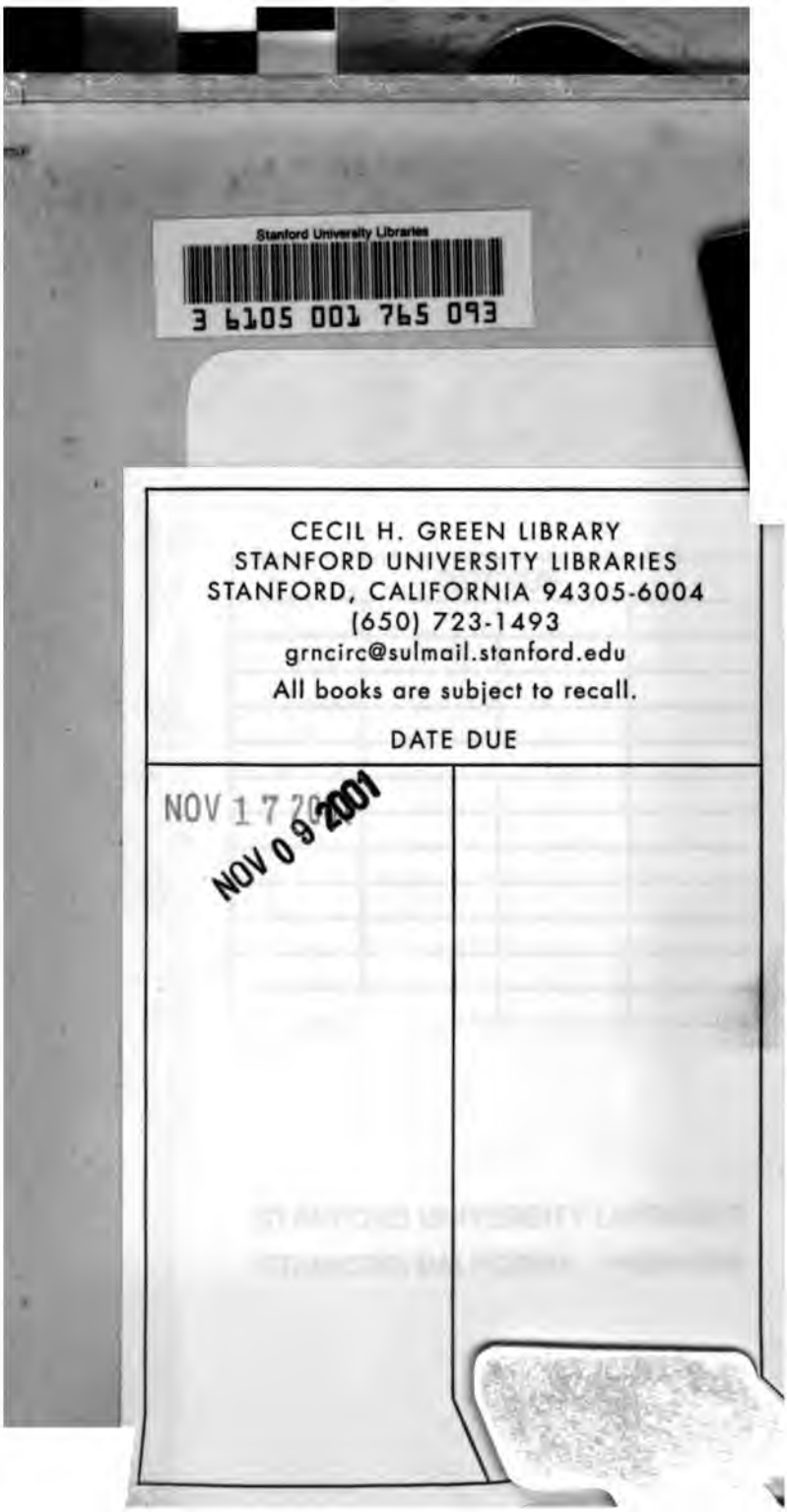
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